Summon This!

by Kells

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Everything looked good. The circle was unbroken, all the required wards were in place, and repeated on the perimeter of the triangle. All the reagents were arranged properly: a lump of fresh bee's wax, a roll of birch-bark, and a trimming of cactus. None of them made sense to Johnathan, any more than the bane did, but they were all in their proper locations. He had the bane in his back pocket, easily accessible. Everything looked perfect, but John still couldn't stop his jitters. He combed back his hair once more, mindless of the white chalk dust on his hands, which went to join the earlier streaks discoloring his normally chestnut brown hair. He felt good reason to be nervous.

To start with, he hated being underground, deep in a corner of the palace cellar with some unholy number of tons of rock and dirt just waiting for a chance to fall. No matter than the palace had withstood a half-dozen sieges in as many decades, and no sapper had managed to collapse the place yet. It was cold and damp here, and it smelled like rot.

As if that unease wasn't enough, he had to constantly keep an ear out for the sound of anyone approaching his forgotten little room. The door had been so covered with moss that it was obvious no one had opened it in years, but it would be just his luck if some over-zealous watchman picked tonight to check on the old cellars. Should that occur, John would either join the last summoner in exile, or end up in a gory public execution. Summoning demons was highly discouraged, and to no surprise. The consequences for a mistake in summoning could make that execution look trivial.

The most likely of those events would be the summoner ending up on the wrong side of some sort of contract. That could be bad, or it could be really bad. Many of the lesser creatures, like the one John was summoning tonight, were more mischievous than malign. They would likely get him thrown in jail, but no worse than that. Some demons didn't follow that rule though, and would take every opportunity to possess a body and do all sorts of dark deeds with it. The worst of the fates though was being dragged back to whatever nightmare realm the creatures came from. It was almost enough to make him rethink this whole plan.

He shook the fear out of himself, his young, unlined face tightening and his cool blue eyes growing hard.

"Stop thinking about the risks!" He ordered himself. "I know the risks, I've taken the precautions. It isn't even a real demon, just an imp. A little trickster." He continued to whisper encouragement to himself as he moved his candles around the triangle. He wanted the creature to be fully visible, while hiding himself as much as possible. He held one candle to himself to light his path. He didn't want to accidently disturb the chalk lines while stumbling around in the dark. The room wasn't large, so he hadn't been able to leave a lot of room in the circle, just enough for him to sit down comfortably. He crouched down at the top of the circle, where the last sigil needed to go, the final piece of the summoning. It didn't look like much; just a couple random shapes and squiggly lines. He had to force his hand not to shake and misdraw it.

With the sigil drawn, it was time to issue the call. Right next to the bane in his pocket was a tiny glass vial with a handful of drops of his blood, taken the last full moon and kept from solidifying with an equal amount of spirits. He gave the vial a thorough shake and then uncapped it onto the sigil he just finished. The blood pattered quietly against the stone floor.

"Kahilbrai, I summon you." He said firmly.

He held his breath, waiting for something spectacular. Or something subtle. Anything at all really.

"Damn." He finally muttered wretchedly. He didn't bother repeating the call. He didn't have any more prepared blood, and it wouldn't do any good. Johnathan was not so new to magic that he didn't know the rules of summoning. A call was not voluntary. If it was at all within Kahilbrai's ability to respond, it would have. The imp was probably already bound somewhere, or perhaps even dead.

"Damn." He said again, realizing that he'd have to go get a broom and sweep up the evidence. It was only a few turns and one long stairwell up to a small servant's closet, but it felt like he was trudging for hours in his disappointment. So much work and time spent to summon one little imp, and it didn't even respond. It was more than wasted effort though. It was all of his hopes for victory tonight being dashed in that clammy little cellar. Broom and rags in hand, he headed back down.

He opened the door into the summoning room and felt his heart jump clear to his throat. The smell of mildew and wet stone was long gone, replaced by the heavy scent of blossoming fruits and floral things. The temperature had climbed to an almost uncomfortable degree. Neither of those things were

what caught his attention though. In the center of the binding triangle was a small padded stool, and upon it sat a beautiful young woman. To his credit, he didn't falter at the sight of her silk-smooth skin, only barely covered by a nearly sheer gossamer cloth at the waist and breast. He ignored the raven dark hair and coy smile and jumped straight to the middle of the circle, throwing the broom and rags behind him.

His body may have acted, but his mind was in chaos. This was not the short, cackling imp he had expected from the description. He didn't know what he had summoned, and the only thing he could determine from that was that he was in incredible danger. He was lucky the wards had even held it, though it was clearly exerting influence beyond the boundaries.

The woman's delicate lips parted with the tiniest of licks, a barely noticeable gesture that still made John's blood come to his face. "I was wondering when you would come back. I hate sitting here all alone" Her voice was as smooth as her skin, and every syllable sounded like a taunt and promise both.

John forced his mind back on track, pulling his eyes away from the smooth curve of her tanned thighs, one crossed over the other to hide what the tiny cloth skirt certainly would not.

"Who are you? You are not Kahilbrai."

"No, I am afraid not. That doesn't have to ruin our night though." She cocked an eye at him, "I'm sure I can offer anything that the little imp could have promised. Tell me darling, what mischief were you planning on getting up to?"

John knew that she was playing tricks with his head. He loved women as much as the next man, but he had always had the discipline to ignore even the most charming of the court ladies when they were trying to pull him into their own plots. He had too much ambition to end up as a pawn to some noble daughter or wife. This time though it took every ounce of that discipline just to pay attention to what she was saying, instead of the infuriatingly tempting way she casually curled her toes, or the idle way she rested her folded hands on her thighs, caressing herself lightly right where he wished his own hands could rest.

He shook his head with a grunt, looking down at the crumbling stones under his feet. His toes were bare inches from stepping on that essential sigil. He hadn't even realized he had stepped forward. If he were to accidently break that sigil, he would break any hold on this creature and he would

certainly be lost. The burn of adrenalin surging into him quickly cut through the fog.

"Answer my question! How did you answer a call that wasn't for you?"

She gave a genuine smile this time. "Well, you dear tenacious man, maybe you should have more carefully studied the crest that you drew." She idly traced one finger through the air, and where it moved a softly glowing line hovered like a golden thread. In a matter of moments she had traced the sigil at John's toes. "You see, this is the sigil you drew. It is my personal crest. I made it specifically to look so much like the one you wanted to draw." She put two tiny dots into the drawing. "This is Kahilbrai's sigil."

John felt his heart spike up again. He had gone and done it now: he had botched the summoning. Every book on magic he had ever gotten his hands on had warned that summoning demons was incredibly risky. The creatures were canny and often used the laws of a binding to their own advantage.

"You know dear, I've done this a few times, and you're the first that had the presence of mind to resist this long. Everyone who's fallen for this trick before is eating out of my hand by the time they closed the door. Even the women." She gave a smirk at that, leaning back slightly so that her chest pushed just a little more forward, the veil slipping so that the tops of her breasts were visible.

"You must be very stubborn. Or perhaps you simply like men."

He knew better than to respond, he really did. He knew that he should have kept asking for information, trying to pry up anything to help him turn this back to his advantage. What he knew he should be doing though, was not what he did. Instead he bit down nice and hard on her bait. "I'm not gay." He blurted.

"So come prove it!" It wasn't a command, or a question; it was a challenge. She reached behind herself and whipped the strip of cloth away from her chest, baring her bosom in all its glory. John felt the immediate physical reaction at the vision. He had been with women before, some more shapely than others, but this female put them all to shame. The size seemed to be perfectly proportioned to her frame, deliciously firm and round. They were just large enough that if were to reach out, he was sure they would fit nicely in his hand. "Come on my lovely young man, just a couple steps and you can have all of me." She discarded the shawl and ran both of her hands slowly over her chest, the two wonderful orbs giving a soft bounce of vitality as she passed over them, rubbing over her navel and stopping at the hem of her

skirt.

John swallowed and struggled to remember that this creature might very well butcher him on the spot if he broke the wards. "What are you?" There was something like a surge in the room that pressed in on him, almost willing him forward, and he knew then that he was feeling the workings of her spell coming apart.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the wanton act faded, and the heady fog of lust over his head cleared like magic, leaving behind only the painfully obvious erection in his pants to prove it had been there at all. There was still a very attractive half-naked woman sitting a few feet from him, but now she was no more difficult to resist than any ordinary woman.

"Oh my, you do have a head on you. You have no idea how much effort I put into those spells, and I've had men break without even needing them. Just the illusion is enough half the time." She didn't seem upset at all to admit that he'd defeated some of her best compulsions. She was even smiling, and this time there didn't seem to be any act behind it. That hardly made him feel safe though. With his head clear he was fully aware of the implications of what she'd said.

"If that's an illusion, what are you really?"

"Oh no, you've impressed me, but it's still too early to go about telling all my secrets." She stood up, casting the skirt away. Even with the spells gone she did it with a flourish that left his eyes momentarily glued to the smooth swell of her sex. He forced his eyes back upwards until they locked on the merrily green eyes watching him carefully.

"How about this little boy; entertain me with what dirty deeds you had planned tonight, and then I'll think about telling you what you've managed to reel into your little trap here."

He didn't have to think long: there wasn't a lot of choice. Summonings lasted until an agreement was made. The only way to send a demon back was to use its bane, but since this wasn't Kahilbrai the bane he had in his pocket may as well have been apple cider for all the good it would do him. So until she was satisfied enough to go back home, he was stuck here.

"Fine. I needed to summon him to help me out with spying on people in the court. I am not a powerful enough magician to scry." He tried to give as little information as possible.

"Why do you need to resort to such tactics? Surely a handsome, sharp witted young man like yourself can get ahead on his own merits."

"Hardly. I am the middle son of a merchant-noble. My family spends much of its profits simply keeping that title of nobility. All of our more wealthy competition has the resources to pay for professional help in court espionage. Good looks and sharp wits can only go so far when it comes to outsmarting a man who can afford to hire a sorcerer to spy on all of your purchases and shipments."

She looked oddly sympathetic to him. As sympathetic as she could be anyhow, bare naked and idly stroking her breasts.

"So what was the exact deal?"

"Why?" He asked, justifiably suspicious.

"Maybe we can work something out. You see, it's been ages since someone has actually lasted long enough to make a deal with me. I'm curious."

He sighed. There wasn't any way a demon of this magnitude would be willing to settle for the pittance that Kahilbrai would have accepted, but he didn't know what else to do.

"The imp was supposed to like sweets, and shiny trinkets. I thought it might settle for a couple jars of honey, and some jewelry, along with the temptation to steal whatever it found in the noble rooms and make a nuisance. In return I wanted documents, notes, diaries, gossip. Anything that would give me the edge in trade or in court."

"And how did you expect the little devil to accomplish all this?"

"He can shape shift into common vermin. Rats, sparrows, snakes and the like."

"Poor dear," she cooed. "You put so much into this, and it would have worked too I'd wager. I don't know that you would have gotten anything spectacular, but you would have had your deal. I almost feel bad for ruining it for you." She smiled seductively, running her hands down her body again, resting them so that they just barely covered her modesty. "Let me make you a new deal, a better deal; spend the night with me. Show me your passion and I will give you everything you wanted and more."

John hesitated. "I still don't know what you are." The idea of coupling with some bloated and distended fiend came to mind and was nearly enough to kill his arousal. Nearly.

"You'll just have to trust me love. I can't promise that I will please you as much as this illusion has, but that's the deal. One leap of faith and a long night, for all your dreams come true."

"If I chose not to accept?"

She shrugged, spinning her back to him, looking over her shoulder. "I suppose you can walk away, but I don't have to leave. Sooner or later someone will come back in here. I wonder if they'll stand the enchantments as well?"

"And you promise I won't be harmed?"

"Oh, there might be some bruises or scratches, but nothing you haven't felt before I'm sure."

He took a long moment to consider. "Fine. You have a deal."

Her smile became absolutely ecstatic. "Wonderful." She turned to face him again, looking terrifyingly smug.

"I think it is time I introduce myself then. My name is Lililethan, Elder Wyrm and sovereign of the Blazing Coast and the lands to the north. You may call me Lily."

It took a brief second for Johnathan's mind to click with what she had just proclaimed. A dragon. He'd summoned a bloody dragon. A creature legendary for its capability for destruction, and he'd brought one of their eldest right into the heart of the city. The wards, the circle, everything; this entire ordeal had been a sham. As this epiphany crossed his face she stepped over the chalk lines. The candles in the room began to flare slowly, building brighter as she stepped right up to him, holding his gaze with hers.

He felt that same overwhelming pressure that he now recognized as her magic. A hurricane filled his ears as the firelight finally grew so bright he had to close his eyes. The instant he did so, he felt a sudden lurch, like someone had just pulled a rug from under him. The sound and pressure died out immediately. He stumbled for a moment, opening his eyes. It didn't do any good; the room had gone completely dark.

He stood there and listened and looked around to no avail; all he could hear was his own pounding heart. Then his hair prickled as he felt a presence move up next to him. He turned to face her, and was rewarded with a gust of warm breath on his neck, flapping the collar of his shirt. He took a step back, and she took a step forward, following him, the breath repeating on his neck. He could swear he could feel the smile as Lily stalked him. Finally he stopped and straightened up. He had to swallow to clear the lump in his throat.

"Fine, you brought me here. Stop toying with me."

"Oh I don't think so." Her voice was changed slightly. There was more resonance to it, and a different quality of the volume, but he knew it was still

her speaking softly mere inches from his face. "This is half the fun. You tremble now, because you think you have an idea of what I am and it frightens you, but the fear won't last." She began to move around him. He could barely make out the shuffle of her footsteps, but even as quiet as they were he could tell that the gait was wrong for anything walking on two feet. "Soon enough, you will become curious. You'll get tired of standing there all rigid and afraid, and then curiosity will take over. You will wonder, what does a dragon look like?"

She gave a short, bubbling laugh. "Of course, I'm not going to let you see, not yet. Your hands will be your guide for now. At first, that may be enough. Then you'll get comfortable, and again curiosity will overcome you, then we'll see what other body parts you can use."

It wasn't possible to bind a dragon to a deal magically. They weren't anything like demons. The agreement they had reached was a simple, mundane verbal exchange, but she seemed to have every intention of holding him to it.

John held his composure. He wouldn't be taken in by her game.

Lily was right though. It took a few minutes of her orbiting around him, sometimes so close she brushed his clothing, but eventually his fingers curled. Certainly it wouldn't hurt to just touch her. After all, how often in history had a man been presented the chance to interact with a dragon safely?

As soon as he reached up though, she halted in place, becoming perfectly silent. And there was the burning of that infuriating smile again, snickering, 'I was right!'

Lacking the reference of her footsteps he was left to grope blindly in the pitch dark, finally coming into contact with something off to his left, at shoulder level. He jerked his hand back for an instant, then more slowly reached forward. There was an instant jolt of recognition as he laid his hand on something warm and humming with life. He ran his fingers gingerly over Lily's hide. He knew she was scaled, his fingers slid over her like glass, individual scales only barely discernable, but she was so warm and surprisingly soft. He felt a powerful throbbing pulse under his fingers, and her muscles shifted slightly with every breath. Feeling slightly braver he cupped his hand and followed the curve of her hide down and around.

Her neck! He realized when he felt her throat clench and swallow. She wasn't that large then, almost his own size.

John hesitated. He had touched her, and nothing terrible had befallen him.

He should take advantage of this, find out what he could. Having justified it to himself, he placed both hand on her neck, slowly rubbing upwards until he was cupping her jaw. He slowed down here. Poking her in the eye would surely be disastrous. With minute and precise movements he began to explore her face, trying to visualize it. She had a muzzle, her fleshless lips twitching in an enormous grin. He felt up around the tip of said muzzle and was greeted by the smooth wetness of her tongue curling between his fingers.

He felt her body shaking with suppressed laughter. "Yes, very hilarious," he said, his eyes rolling even though she couldn't see it.

He wiped his hand dry on his trousers before he continued to carefully probe around her eyes and brow, touching the bases of two horns. Lily gave a slight gasp as his hands found her ears. He cocked his head at the sound and repeated his action without thinking, tracing his fingers along the velvet edges. This time her whole body shivered, pressing into him, her head nestling into his neck. "Oh, that feels very nice." He felt a peculiar mix of emotions. Part of his mind stubbornly maintained that this was purely a scientific study, but a growing dissident faction of his brain begged to differ. Something in him found the noises she was making and the feeling of her warm body pressing against him very pleasant. In the confused mix of motivations he couldn't think to do anything other than continue to caress the sensitive membranes.

"Ah!" He gave a yelp of his own as her warm tongue tickled wetly down the front of neck, diving below the ruffles of his shirt. John's face warmed as he endured the tongue bathing. That small minority of him that was still resisting quickly began to crumble as he realized that this whole thing was making him very excited. The idea of a night here seemed less and less of a chore. His train of thought was interrupted as Lily progressed from just licking to giving the tiniest of nibbles across his collar, resulting in him wrapping his arms around her neck involuntarily.

"Oh hell." He said in defeat as he felt her smile against his throat. It took a few minutes before she finally ceased the affectionate attention to his throat, nudging him lightly.

John took this as his queue to continue his search, and ran his hands back down her spine. He quickly found her shoulders, and had to stop there for a moment to explore the unique double joints and the impressive cords of muscle that anchored her wings. He was completely unsurprised at the lack of breasts when he moved down onto her front. What did take him by surprise

were her hands. He had expected something more crude for a creature that walked on all fours, but when he felt down one arm to the bottom she lifted her hand and twined the fingers with his.

Every inch that he explored made him just a little more at ease and a little more excited. Yes it was a mind-blowingly strange scenario; it was also a chance of a lifetime to share a connection this amazing person. Suddenly John stopped. He had never considered himself a romantic man. He hadn't been cruel to any past lovers, but most of his dalliances had been out of a shared lust or as an exchange of favors. Standing there, holding her hand, his concepts of physical attraction had been thrown out the window here and replaced by something else. He didn't know that he would call it love, but it was new, and he liked it.

Lily's wings were folded neatly across her back so as not to interfere with his roaming hands. He coaxed her to unfold one of them, but even with both arms fully extended he couldn't touch her shoulder and elbow joint at the same time. Such a massive search would have to be done when she allowed light again. Finally his fingers graced the top of her hips where her tail began. At that moment she rolled away from his touch, leaving his grasping for a moment. The soft thud of her weight hitting the ground bounced through his feet, and then her hand was grasping his again. She pulled him slowly down to kneel beside her, placing his hand on her stomach.

He tried to take his time and linger on the smooth expanse of flesh, but each time he lingered too long in one area Lily guided his hand a hair lower. "I thought you said the play was half the fun." John teased with a grin of his own.

"Yes, when I'm playing with you. Right now though, I desire something a little more, direct." With the final word she pushed his hand down right between her thighs and released it there. John knew by the blazing heat and gentle curve of her body that he was very close to her sex. There was a tiny moment where he considered stopping here before he decided that he was looking forward to this as much as Lily was. He just wanted a better position. He left one hand pressing there between her legs and used the other to balance himself as he climbed over to straddle her stomach, allowing him much better access.

Her lips were puffy to the touch, covered with a very light sheen of silky moisture that gave off an oddly sweet aroma as he touched it. Her stomach tensed and clenched under him when he pressed oh so tenderly around her

vagina. While his right hand lightly stimulated her, his left continued to roam. A few inches lower he found another small grove in her bottom that he touched only briefly before he realized what it was.

"Don't be shy," she said playfully, "Everything down there is clean."

A plan began to form in his mind, and he began stroking her with more vigor, eliciting a pleased sigh from her. He felt a little disappointed that he could not find a clitoris. Some tender attention to that had always gone over well with past lovers. Slowly he pressed two fingers into her with one hand while continuing the massage with the other. She gasped, and he could tell immediately that it wasn't in a good way by the way his fingers tugged at the sensitive flesh. He had progressed too fast, she was still too dry, and that wouldn't do at all. He extracted his fingers delicately and stuck them in his mouth, sampling the very tangy sugary taste lingering on them. It was a nicely exotic flavor, similar enough to what he was familiar with to make him more comfortable. He licked the remaining flavor off, and then pushed them back into her. They were plenty slick, and all the noises she made sounded good this time.

He gave his other two fingers the same treatment and more before placing them at the much tighter pucker he had found. His usual distaste for this type of play didn't matter now. All that mattered was pleasing his partner. His fingers slipped slowly into her tightly grasping rump, one at a time. She responded very vocally, and clenched her thighs around him. "Mmm! That feels wonderful love. Keep going, you're doing very well." She punctuated her statement by tugging his boots off. A hollow clatter off to one side signaled that they had been discarded. His trousers quickly followed, and he felt a surge of desire as he lay there naked, his stiff member grinding into her firm belly.

The cool air only lasted a moment before he felt her snout press between his legs; that deliciously warm tongue wrapping around and around his shaft, covering him completely.

"Uh!" Was all John could manage to grunt. Her tongue squeezed and writhed in a way that was far beyond anything he had experienced.

Lily was finally getting good and moist all on her own, and he decided to push in a third, then a fourth finger. As his fingers pushed ever deeper into her, he brushed against something stiff and spongy on the roof of her tunnel.

"Oh. . .f-futh!" She cried out loudly into the darkness as she grasped his hips with both hands. The attempt at profanity was ruined by her tongue still

pleasuring him, but it was a surprising encouragement to him. He repeated the gesture, and the results were equally impressive. He incorporated that little bump with the rest of his movements, twisting his fingers in her tail-hole back and forth, and licking furiously at her bits. As her excitement built, so did her musk, until the scent of salted melons filled his nose.

John couldn't say how long the lusty back and forth went before Lily wrapped her legs forcefully around him, her ankles crossed over the back of his head. She trumpeted out a cry of victory as her orgasm washed over her. Her passage clenched like a soft vise, smothering his hand, while her tail-hole spasmed wildly. The peak passed regretfully quickly, as it always did, leaving her purring in the aftermath. He slowed his assault, cupping her mound warmly and trying to maintain a gentle stimulation. She seemed to appreciate the contact, stroking down his back with one clawed hand and pulling his manhood into her mouth, giving a powerful suckle. John tried to control his breathing and hold out. It was all too much. The heavy odor of sex, the perverse wet sounds coming from her mouth, and most of all the torture of that tongue!

It was a short stretch later that he felt his loins tighten, and release. He came into the twisting coils of her tongue, a gift which she received with another small chuckle before she let him go. He let his head roll to the side, resting against her thigh as the lights faded on.

John wanted very much to just lounge there in the warm haze, but he couldn't. He had to see her; he had to lay eyes on this wonderful woman he had just made love with. He stood up and took a step back to take her in fully

She lounged with her head resting in one hand, eyes watching him, a glowing smile plastered on her face. She was not hideous at all. Her emerald scales covered a form of elegance and wonder, from her short sweeping horns to the narrow tip of her tail. He had guessed her size about right, and as sleek and streamlined as she was, she couldn't have weighed to much more than him, even with the long, tapering tail twitching behind her.

He smiled, kneeling back down to plant a small kiss on the end of her muzzle. "Thank you. Thank you for asking me to trust you." He chuckled. "I never even conceived the idea of making love to a dragon, but that was amazing."

She leaned forward, grinning wickedly, her lips pressing against his in a much deeper kiss. John blushed at the salty taste of himself still lingering in her mouth. Once her tongue was back in her own mouth she pulled away.

"Love, that was just a warm-up."

Summon This! Continued

"So you live alone in this whole place?" John asked curiously, resting on marble edge of a pond-sized bathtub while fruity smelling steam rose around him. He had convinced Lily to let him at least get cleaned up for a few minutes while he recuperated. She lay on her stomach at the poolside next to him, splashing her tail tip in the water and watching his activities intently.

"Of course not. A great number of people live and work here in my castle. They just don't usually come into my personal chambers." She had shown him around the complex of rooms that made up those chambers. The entryway where they had spent the first few passionate minutes had been the smallest of them, and even that was larger than some homes. A long hallway branched off to the other areas. Her bedroom was downright intimidating. Massive cushions were stacked up in one corner of the room, making a sprawling bed taller than he was.

The pool he was currently treading water in occupied a room all to itself. Pleasantly warm water bubbled constantly through several grates in the bottom of the pool and flowed out through a drainage system in the back wall. A small lever in the wall next to the entrance and a large block of shelving running the length of the room were the only other denizens. The former was the only control of the flow of water; the latter was filled with jars of scented oils, soaps, and massive fluffy towels. All of the rooms were made up of huge marble slabs and ceilings that curved up into arches that weren't quite reached by the flickering lamplight of the place.

"I was just curious, because I notice that this whole place seems designed for someone a lot bigger than you are."

Lily rolled her eyes at him. "This isn't your court back home dear, and you don't have to probe for information. If you want to know something just ask me."

"Are you using magic to make yourself smaller?"

"Yes. I take this little hybrid shape to make it possible interact with a human partner. I'm afraid otherwise I would harm you."

"Oh. How big are you?"

"It's not really important." She said, seeming slightly uncomfortable with the subject.

"All the same, I would like to see you as you really are some day." He said

earnestly.

"Why is that?"

John frowned, not quite able to put an explanation to his desire. "I really don't know. I just feel like I need to know more about you."

Lily gave him a queer look and he suddenly felt self-conscious. "Never mind, forget I asked."

"Maybe someday you will see me, but not tonight. We still have unfinished business to attend to." John realized too late that her tail slipped further into the water when it went probing up his thigh and perilously close to his ass.

"Ah-hah! Oh!" He yelped, swatting at the tail and quickly climbing out of the pool. "I was actually hoping to see a little more of this place before we got to that."

Lily smirked and stood, creeping forward in a predatory maneuver. "I think you're trying to avoid the deed, love."

"Er, no I'm not. Actually I enjoyed our sex a lot more than I expected. I just feel a bit awkward being so intimate with someone I know so little about. Even the most crass of my previous encounters were precursored by at least some conversation and introduction." By the time he finished his sentence she had backed him up against a wall, her chest pressed to his and her dazzling eyes searching his face.

"So you say, but you are the one who decided to pleasure me so nicely tonight without even telling me your name."

It was with some horror that he realized he never had gotten to giving his name. His mouth dropped open in a stammering apology, "Oh, no. I'm sorry, this has all happened so fast-" His apology was silenced when she darted forward and engaged him in a passionate kiss, her mirth obvious in her eyes.

"Relax," she murmured into his cheek, "I know you didn't mean any offense."

"Johnathan. My name is Johnathan Wright."

"Well, Johnathan, I suppose it wouldn't do any harm in showing you my home."

He smiled and leaned his forehead against the tip of her nose. "Thanks. To be honest I am a little nervous about actually having sex."

"Dear one, I have swallowed your cum. The time for shyness and nervousness is a bit passed."

He swallowed his mortification at her bluntness. Oh how the ladies back home would react to such language. "I'm just worried that I'll disappoint

you."

"John, no couple is ever perfect for each other on their first night together. I'm not expecting you to be a god in bed. I'm honestly happily surprised that you've done as well as you have." She kissed him again, much more lightly. "But, the key to good lovemaking is for both partners to be having fun in the act. If you are really upset, I will wait and help you calm down."

He wrapped his arms around her neck and basked in her warm breath on his face, his fingers stroking lovingly along her spine in gratitude with her patience. Suddenly Lily pulled away, turning quickly towards the entrance.

"Come on then, let's get that tour started."

John struggled to keep up with her unusually swift pace

"Lily, can you slow-Wow!" His train of thought was thrown off when she threw open the main doors to the chambers, revealing the incredible vista outside.

The doors opened up out onto a plaza that could have held a small village. The far edge of the plaza dropped off out of sight, and beyond that was a brilliantly white beach. The sea rippled like a sapphire blanket off into the horizon, the white-caps of waves crashing ashore only barely visible from this distance.

John ran down the steps onto the plaza, heedless of his nakedness or his bare feet. He stood at the railing and gazed off into the distance, his mouth slack in wonder. They must have been far away from his homeland. It had been nearing midnight there, but here the sun was just beginning its fall into the sea. Lily eventually appeared behind him, her head hovering just over his shoulder.

"I've never seen the ocean before", John admitted, his voice muted. "All of my travels have been in the mainland. I've always wanted to go."

"Would you like to go down to the beach?"

"Yes, I think I would like that."

"Follow me then." Lily padded away from the edge, and John reluctantly tore his gaze away to follow her. Looking around, he could begin to make out more of the castle. It seemed grown right out of the side of the rocky cliffs, with masoned stone buildings around the plaza blending down into the reddish rock at their bases. She led him through an archway into one of the other buildings.

Lily hadn't been exaggerating that there were lots of people here. The bustling outbuildings made a strong contrast with the serene calm of the

plaza. The presence of dozens of people also made him remember his nudity with a vengeance. Of course, many of the residents here seemed to be far less concerned about clothing themselves. The standard attire for the men seemed to be a simple pair of knee length pants and a strap of braided leather for a belt. The women wore the same, with some opting to also include a loosely fitting vest.

Fortunately he was so flustered by the casual displays of nudity and trying to find some way to cover himself that he didn't make it more painful by becoming aroused. He attempted to dodge behind Lily and put himself between her and the wall, but she seemed to take some sort of perverse pleasure in his discomfort and purposely pushed him on ahead of her like some sort of prize. She even went so far as to give him a nip in the bum when he tried again to use her for cover.

"You are a cruel and heartless fiend." He muttered to her over the clamor of the activities around them.

"I do enjoy seeing you squirm."

She stopped briefly to snag a couple sheets off of a laundry line. No one seemed to object to her claiming them. John tried to wrap them around himself, but was halted by a humored rebuke.

"Don't you dare!"

He sighed resigned himself to exhibitionism

Finally they came out at the base of the cliffs, onto the beach. Some of the locals were out as well, their sun-bronzed skin standing in great contrast to the white sand of the beach. He followed the dragoness to a small cove, secluded from the rest of the area by two small spurs that jutted out from the cliff face.

"This will do nicely. Lay the sheet out here John."

"Of course, your majesty." He quipped. Lily took a moment to shake the sand from her feet daintily before laying down on her side, looking out at the sunset. John sat next to her to take in the spectacle. As the sun dipped lower out of sight, it cast fiery light along the crests of the waves, making the crystal blue waters light up with traceries of gold and orange. It was so beautiful that John felt obliged not to detract from it by speaking. Finally the orb sank out of sight, leaving only a muted orange glow lighting up the evening.

"It's funny; I used to have fantasies of spending romantic evenings on a beach with an attractive woman, back when I was a more randy and ignorant

youth."

"Do you find me attractive?"

She was looking at him now, her face carefully passive.

He searched for a moment, wanting to answer honestly. "Yes, I do."

She still looked unconvinced. "I see. What exactly do you find attractive about me?"

John knew the conversation had entered perilous territory with these questions, and thought hard about his answer. He had only had a couple turbulent hours to form any feelings or opinions about her, and some of those feelings were still difficult for him to fully accept.

"It's your attitude, your personality. I don't think I've ever spoken with someone who is so straightforward before. I'm sure you keep secrets, but you aren't dancing around them like a game. And you enjoy sex for its own pleasure, rather than treating it like some bargaining chip. Not that I just like you for sex." He added hastily.

"I don't know. I feel foolish trying to analyses who you are after so short a time. I've just never met anyone who behaves quite like you."

"Calm down John. This isn't an interrogation. It's not like I'm going to set you aflame for saying something wrong." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Do you want to know one of my secrets?"

"Um sure, I guess."

"Do you know what my primary intention is for intercepting summons for the imp?"

"Well, no. I don't see any benefit to you that you couldn't get through easier means."

She nodded. "It's not for my benefit. Not entirely anyhow. I do it so that I can snare young and naive magicians and persuade them away from the dangers of summoning. I enrapture them with that phantasm you witnessed and get them to confess their motives. Those with harmless intentions I frighten out of future attempts."

"And those with darker intentions?"

"Let's not spoil the mood too much." She said elusively.

He accepted the hint at face value and digested the words. "Then why did you bring me back here?"

"You stood out. You resisted my compulsions, and then admitted why you were summoning the imp anyhow. A less principled man might have fled and left someone else to get caught by my illusions, but you didn't."

John didn't remember there being much of a choice, but he was willing to accept her kind words.

"You were polite during our conversation, and most importantly you were open-minded."

"What do you mean by that?"

"When I offered you a night with me, you actually said yes, knowing full well that I wasn't human. My own kind are few and far between on this side of the world, most have left the lands of men, so I turn to humans for company, and sometimes for pleasure."

John felt a pang of sympathy for her.

"Anyhow, I don't really feel like you need a lecture about the dangers of summoning at this point. I think you've gotten the idea. I just didn't want you thinking that you're only here as just another conquest."

"No, not at all."

The conversation trailed off, leaving the two of them gazing together at the sky first dimming, then beginning to brighten again with stars.

John had almost dozen off in the comfortable silence when he was startled by Lily's hand on his shoulder, pulling him down to lay with his back against her stomach. Neither of them seemed to feel the need to speak yet. Lily's touch wandered progressively lower, as she leaned in the tickle his ear with her tongue. Finally she rested her scaled palm directly upon his groin, lightly stroking his maleness.

He felt compelled to watch as her hand deftly encircled his shaft, stroking slowly up and down the length of it palming his sack with her other hand. Lily's smooth scales slid nicely along his skin, coaxing him quickly into a more amorous frame of mind. He let her continue for a minute, but before things got too far John reached down and carefully pulled her hands away, then turned around to face her. Still holding her hands he crawled forward over straddling her tail and leaning down to plant little kisses upward along her neck. Each time his lips touched her flesh he came away with the tiniest remnant of that same sweet flavor.

"Hmm, I don't know," he nibbled, "whether that's soap," and again, "or you just taste like that," one more time, "but I like it."

Her throat trembled under the treatment. "The world may never know." She purred smugly, her claws tracing little circles on his back. Finally he reached her mouth. John still felt a little strange smooching a dragon on the mouth. Lily didn't use her lips so much as her tongue, which made for a very

deep kiss indeed. He tickled her ears as the kept at it, making her eyes flutter closed in bliss.

"Foreplay is nice love," She eventually said, after separating their twisted tongues, "but the night is short here, and I'm in the mood for something more."

"Ah!" John sucked in a breath as he felt her tail snaked between them, curling tightly around his cock. He didn't resist as she guided him right into position, with the warmth of her vent pressing on his tip. He eased forward, with her tail still wrapped around him. Both her appendage and his organ slipped into the furious heat of her body.

Lily seemed to have warmed up much more readily this time, and gave only the most ardent of noises at the penetration. When his loins were pressed flush against hers John paused and reveled in the sensations. It felt amazing. She clenched and throbbed and moved around him in return for every little twitch he made. As if that wasn't enough, her wings came up, wrapping around him in an all-encompassing embrace.

Having gotten his bearings, John slid back out a little. His breath hitched as her tail coiled tighter, its length rubbing back between his thighs. He struggled to keep calm as he started a slow rhythm. It was hard not to be overwhelmed by the intensity of the pleasure, but he forced himself first to focus on breathing. Deep, slow breaths in and out. He put his hands to work, massaging and rubbing those sensitive zones he'd found on her neck.

Lily seemed to be doing everything she could to break his concentration, grinding her tail against his balls and tightening it around his length, trying to pull him deeper inside of her with each thrust. When she began rolling her hips up to meet his he momentarily lost it, groaning loudly and clutching desperately against her with each collision. Then the head of his penis brushed against that little bump.

Lily gave a most uncharacteristic squeak, and thrust forward with her tail, pushing another couple inches in and pulling him along with it. He fought to regain his composure as her hands slid down to just above his hips, pushing down harder with each thrust. She twisted and writhed wildly under him, lost in the moment. He kept going, humping just a little faster, trying to time his breathing with the rhythm of their hips

John could feel her strong heart beating where his chest pressed to hers, her glittering scales heaving along her sides from the effort of breathing. She was getting close; he could feel her sex spasming almost constantly. Her feet

kicked up off the ground to grip his rump and thighs tightly, her claws digging in just enough to sting. She forced him down with her powerful legs, no longer thrusting so much as gyrating erratically against him. It was inevitable for her, right there on the edge. Lily was not content to hit that plateau alone though.

In that last moment she yanked her tail back out of herself and pointed it at a new target. There was no warning for John. In an instant she had plunged the smooth tapered tip past his cheeks and into him, her own fluids making the penetration frictionless. He yelled out, burying his face against her throat and clinging to her tightly. There was no holding back after that; he cascaded right behind her right into orgasm. His whole body tensed up in ecstasy, his loins tightening massively to force his seed out into her. That caused him to clench down on the intruding appendage in his ass, driving the pleasure even higher in a wicked cycle.

That peak seemed to last an eternity to John. It seemed she was touching him everywhere at once, his whole body wrapped in the warmth of wings, and all four of her limbs cradling him to herself. Combined with the wonderful massage her insides were delivering, and the completely unfamiliar thrill of her tail slowly twisting farther up into him, he was in sensory overload.

"I think you have ruined sex for me." John mumbled when he had finally gathered his wits enough to speak.

Lily's chest thrummed in near silent laughter. "I'm glad you liked it."

"Err, yes. It was unexpectedly pleasant." The revelation was slightly uncomfortable to John. "I don't suppose you could, um, pull it out of me?" Words he had never imagined himself uttering.

She moved one hand off his hips, reaching up to comb back his hair, her eyes searching his face. "Does it bother you John?"

"Well, yes. A little."

"Why? You said it felt good."

He shrugged awkwardly, "I just feel like, as a man, I'm not supposed to enjoy that sort of thing."

Her fingers danced carefully along his face, cupping his cheek. "John, not to be rude, but that's rubbish. Not all men enjoy it, it's true, but a great many of my partners have. Men, women, even other dragons. It's just another way for me to try and please you, and it certainly doesn't make you less of a man."

Somehow the image of a powerful dragon snared up in the same situation

he was in was somehow mollifying, even amusing. "I suppose." He relented.

"Good. I happen to like my tail right where it is." She underscored the sentence by curling the tip of her tail ever so slightly, tugging his insides with it.

"Ah!" John moaned, toes curling in reaction.

"It has kept you so wonderfully hard too." As her inner-walls began to clench upon him again he had to note that he had indeed stayed rather erect. As Lily started to roll her hips against him once more, he wondered how long that would last.

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The rest of the night was filled with a combination of conversation and unquenchable ardor. By the time the sun rose in the morning the two of them were exhausted, sore, and a little sticky, all in the most satisfying of ways. During the night John had learned more about Lily between bouts of sex, and sometime over the course of that education his feelings has transcended anything purely physical. He was actually reluctant to leave, and drug his feet on the way back through the citadel. It was almost deserted this early in the day, which made it easier for him to say what he wanted to say.

"You know Lily, I don't really have to go home today."

She faltered mid-step for a moment, "Last night wasn't enough for you?" She said with faux cheer.

"Actually I was thinking maybe you could show me around the city more. I'm sure there are forms of recreation around here that don't involve the transfer of bodily fluids."

"I don't think that is a good idea." She responded, still with that fake tone of voice

"Why?" He pressed. "You said you were lonely, and I would be more than happy to keep you company."

"It's complicated Johnathan."

"How is it complicated? You're an intelligent, kind, and beautiful woman that happens to be a fantastic lover. I know I don't have a lot to offer in comparison, but you must have seen something in me that attracted you."

"Yes, I do find myself attracted to you; much more than I had anticipated," she snapped, finally dropping her façade. Her tail lashed in agitation. "The problem is that there is one thing that you can't offer that I want very much."

"What is it?" He asked stopping in place, trying to keep his own voice neutral.

She stopped a few steps ahead of him, then turned to face him.

"Children."

The softly spoken word took the wind right out of John's hopes.

"I don't want to hurt you John, and I don't want to be hurt myself. If a male of my own kind comes along, I can't put us in a situation when I have to choose between you and a family."

"You wouldn't have to choose, I could stay until then, and leave if someone ever comes along." He said wretchedly, knowing that his argument was already lost.

"Even if you were willing to do that, I can't do that to you. I couldn't be so cruel to keep you around like some toy to be discarded when the real thing comes along." She hung her head. "I have made that mistake before John. I put my need for comfort above another's feelings. In the end it broke down into pain and resentment."

He felt a numbness spread through him then. "I understand."

"I'm sorry John. I don't want to send you home, believe me, but if you stay any longer I don't know if I'll be able to make myself do it."

The rest of the trip went in silence. John retreated into the bath for a minute to collect himself and wash off the evening's efforts. When he emerged Lily was holding his clothes in one hand, and a small silver flask in the other. "Kahilbrai's bane. I suppose I could use a good drink of whiskey now." He mused, accepting the flask from her.

"It's not just whiskey anymore. As per my end of the bargain, I put an enchantment on the flask that should help you fulfill your goals at home. Just be sure to word your wish very carefully before drinking it; the spell is volatile and powerful."

It seemed like so long ago that he had been so focused on something so petty. Now more than anything else, he just wished he could stay here. Instead he got dressed and put the would-be bane back into his trousers.

"Are you ready to go home?" Lily asked after moment of him standing there mute.

John couldn't help himself. He threw his arms around her neck to feel her warmth one last time. "I love you." He uttered softly into her ear. He was surprised to feel her return the embrace, wrapping him in both arms and sitting back on her haunches to hold him against her.

"I will miss you Johnathan Wright." He felt the building pressure that signaled her using magic, and the room started swimming. Everything

seemed to blur together in his head for a minute before he felt the same lurch. The next thing he knew he was sitting alone in a pitch black room that smelled of mold and dampness. For a long time he just sat on the floor, unwilling to move and verify where he was. Eventually he sighed and started fumbling around in the darkness, finding the stubs of candles now burned to piles of wax.

Still feeling curiously numb he muttered one of the few cantrips he knew, conjuring a small bead of glowing light. Just about the time he finished that he began to hear a commotion growing louder somewhere in the cellar. Someone was shouting and running, the sounds getting closer. He was just about to open the door when the handle was ripped from his grasp, two watchmen standing in the entryway with truncheons in one hand and lanterns in the other, drowning out the feeble light of his spell.

"Goefrey! We found him!" The larger of the two shouted loudly, before they prodded him back into the room with the truncheons. "Don't you move demon!"

John retreated to the center of the room as the guards blocked off the door. John knew the name Geofrey; he was the crown executioner, who was responsible for handling those who dealt with demons. He felt a surge of conflicting emotions storming within him. First he started laughing at the ridiculous nature of it all. He had started the night not really believing in love, with hardly the faintest of concern for the existence of dragons, entirely focused on bettering his life here. Finishing the night, he had managed to be afflicted by the first in regards to the second, and cared not at all about the third.

Now he would be executed for the failed summoning that had started the whole damned mess. The laughing was quickly joined by burning streaks of tears, at which point he just sat down in the useless lines of chalk and waited for the next punch line.

"Son, can you talk?"

The gravelly voice and firm hand on his shoulder snapped him out of the daze somewhat. He hiccupped on a couple straggling chuckles and nodded, wiping his eyes. Geofrey was kneeling in front of him, watching him carefully. The old man looked like someone's kindly grandfather, with snow white hair and a somewhat unkempt beard framing a heavily weathered face.

"Did anything respond to the summon?"

"Yeah." John confessed. It was pointless pretending he didn't draw the

design on the floor.

"Is it still here?"

"No, nothing stayed behind. There shouldn't be any danger to the city."

Geofrey looked over his shoulder at two court Magisters that John hadn't even noticed.

"He seems to be telling the truth. Aside from the lingering transport spell that we felt, there's nothing else down here."

The blue eyes softened, "Son, you know what the punishment for attempting to summon demons is, don't you?"

"Yes sir." John replied, sobering up rapidly now to the reality of what lay ahead. "Can you do it discreetly sir? I'd just as soon not have my family know anything about this."

The man looked grave, "We'll see." He said without much hope

"What's this?" The old man said, holding up the flask.

"Whiskey, sir."

Carefully uncapping it, Geofrey wafted a small bit of the smell towards himself. After a moment's consideration he recapped it and handed it back to John. "You might want to have that for this evening. Come on now, time to get you out of here."

The Magisters and guards made something of a living cage around John, who was guided along by Geofrey. "How old are you son?"

"I just turned twenty-three years old sir."

"Why did you get mixed up in this? You should be getting married right now, starting a family. Not going off trying to make deals with monsters."

John smiled ruefully. "Tell me about it."

Shame and embarrassment burned John's face while he was being led through the castle. Open stares and whispers marked their passing.

They took a servant's exit out of the palace, where a short, squat, prison carriage waited. It was built out of heavy lumber, with iron bars over the one small window. "Get in boy." Geofrey ordered solemnly.

John climbed inside and watched as the door closed with a solid thump, the guards closing a heavy lock on the outside. The carriage was bare inside, leaving John to sit on the floor. He still held the flask in his palm, and slowly began turning it over when the carriage started bouncing away from the palace. He might be able to wish his way out of this, but somehow it didn't really seem to matter anymore. Even if Lily's spell could help him escape, he would still be a criminal in his homeland, certainly disowned by his family.

Lily wouldn't have him, his family wouldn't have him, and the sudden bleakness of rejection left him little motivation to try and learn to live life as a fugitive. He might as well face the axe now, rather than starving the death in a month on the run.

No, he knew what he wanted now. He uncapped the flask, and held it to his lips. "I hope Lily finds someone who can make her happy." He said aloud, before tipping his head back. The whiskey had been cheap, and burned on its way down, settling in his stomach with warmth that he would expect from the drink. He didn't expect that warmth to continue to build up inside him, seeming to burn his insides. "Ah!" He gasped, doubling over and clutching at his gut as he felt the painful heat radiate outward to the rest of him, developing into a searing pins and needles feeling. Then the changes started.

A ripple of scarlet scales had erupted all over him, and he felt his whole body twist and expand. His pants ruptured as a long tail sprouted from the base of his spine, and his shirt practically exploded from him with the sudden appearance of his wings. As he continued to swell in size he feared he would be crushed by the confines of the carriage, but the construct shattered like so much kindling behind the force of the magic powering his changes. The drivers had scarcely enough time to abandon their vehicle and dash to safety.

John continued to swell in size as his legs twisted under him, and the last scraps of his clothing were destroyed in the transformation. His vision blurred as his face stretched and distorted into a muzzle, his jaws sprouting an array of teeth that would have left a shark jealous. Despite his best attempts to remain on two legs, the weight of his wings and the stretching of his spine caused John to drop to all fours. His arms almost gave out under the weight, but they too quickly enlarged with muscle and bone, now matching the length of his legs, leaving no doubt as to his quadrapedal nature.

Finally the deafening pressure of magic sputtered and faded, leaving John stripped entirely of his humanity. John reeled, his head swimming in a shocked stupor. He looked down once more at the flask still clutched dumbly in one gigantic hand. "Huh.”

The daze was interrupted by a shrill screech of a terrified woman. John looked up at the source of the sound, finding himself staring through a third floor at the nude form of a lady in her bedroom. She was watching him with abject horror, as though she expected him to lurch forward and devour her. "Sorry.” He mumbled. Well, he tried to mumble. The words came out loud enough to rattle the window panes.

His attention was rapidly drawn away by a sudden flash of light and heat and a dull impact on his flank. He looked back curiously to see one of the magisters trying to work up another ball of flame. "Get the lancers!" The hoarse voice of Geofry echoed through the streets.

"Oh hell." Royal lancers were ran regular patrols through the main thoroughfares of the city, it wouldn't be more than a minute before they'd reach him. "I think I'd better be going now, excuse me please." John took a step back away from the mages, only to be rewarded by the sound of crumbling masonry. He swallowed and looked back at corner of the building he had just kicked in, even as an absent swipe of his tail took the thatch from the roof of another house. He tried to reposition and take one more step back, and almost tottered over. Backing up would require more practice than he had time for at the moment. He looked ahead to the mages. "You really want to move."

They must have realized his intent, because both men's eyes went wide and they dived out of his path as John began a clumsy trot in that direction. Cries of fear and damaged buildings gave a clear trail of his path through the city, but his massive strides outpaced the cavalry, even taking into account the occasional trip and fall. Years of working with contractors and merchants helped him keep a rough tally of the damage done; it was enough to make him glad he wouldn't be paying for it. At least no one had been hurt. He made sure to make enough noise to alert people to get out of his way as he made it to the city wall.

The wall was just over head height for him now, so John reared up and gripped it tightly, intending on climbing over it. Instead, as he put his bulk into the wall, a section of it collapsed under him, blocks of stone the size of wagons rolling into the moat beyond. "Sorry!" John shouted back over his shoulder as he got back to his feet. A few arrows clattered from his hide as he stepped carefully over the watery pit; apparently the guard didn't take kindly to him tearing down their fortifications. It didn't matter though, he was out of the city, and as long as he could keep up his current pace, there wasn't any chance of him being caught.

With the immediate issue of escape taken care of, he was forced to focus on the fact that he was no longer human. He wasn't sure how exactly it had happened, but Lililethan's spell had apparently turned him into a dragon. "Now how the hell is turning me into a dragon supposed to make her happy?" He muttered to himself. Connecting the dots took a moment in his adrenalin

charged haze, but a huge toothy grin slowly spread across his face. Shortly after that he was laughing, taking short hops and trying to flap his wings to speed his journey. He wasn't sure how far it was to the blazing coast from here, but Lily wanted a dragon, and he planned on delivering.

Summon This! The Return

The view from the balcony of Lililethan's palace was undeniably beautiful. Perfect blue waters and pristine white sand provided an unrivaled scene. Rolling whispers of the surf and wind provided an almost meditative peace of mind, even in the most tumultuous of times. Recently, however, that serenity had eluded Lily. In recent months her mental state had been undeniably perturbed. In all the years that she had been seducing mortal men and women, none had made an impression like John had. Others had all been nice enough; Lily was picky about the attitudes of her lovers, but even the most open of them had given the impression that being with her was something they did only reluctantly. Perhaps it was a sense of taboo, or perhaps she intimidated them. Whatever the reason, none had connected with her like Johnathan. Certainly none of them offered to stay after the agreed upon night.

At the time she had seen John as a complication in her plans, and had thought is for the best that they part ways. Now her mind was filled with thoughts of what could have been, and the desire to go back and change the past. Unfortunately that ability lay beyond even her power, and she had not had the foresight to leave a way to contact John again. The fact that he had not used her sigil to contact her again gave the worrying indication that he had moved on with his life, doubtlessly taking some human woman as his wife. Feelings of jealousy and regret were things that Lily was unaccustomed to.

Bare feet shuffling on stone reached her sensitive ears, warning her of a visitor. Lily forced the contemplative frown from her face as a woman approached across the expanse of the veranda. "Good evening Maribel", Lily greeted as the human had come within a polite distance. The woman smiled in return, giving a brief incline of her head. A small badge of authority hung from a simple chain around Maribel's neck, marking her as the commanding officer of the local constabulary. Aside from that and a pair of very loose pants held up by an unoccupied sword belt, Maribel's dark bronze skin was exposed to the twilight air.

"Good evening Lililethan. We have some interesting news. A young male dragon is headed this way down the north coast. He should be here in a couple hours."

The announcement temporarily stunned Lily, and not for the first time she

was glad that the scales of her face revealed little involuntary emotion. This would be the first dragon to approach in over a decade, and the brief thrill it clashed unpleasantly with her recent pining over John.

A long moment of awkward silence hung in the air as she considered her options. "I'll meet him in the air. I don't expect any trouble, but please have a troop on the ground in case he gets excited." Dragons were powerful, regardless of age, and there was always the off chance that this one could be unfriendly.

Maribel nodded again slightly, "Of course."

After a moment of thought Lily added, "Also, have some food prepared. If he's flying hard I'm sure he would appreciate a meal."

Maribel smirked slightly, "Perhaps he will even stay the night?" Despite her discretion on the topic, Lily's desire for a family was not a secret. It was shared by the populace as well; if one dragon had ensured such a safe and prosperous kingdom, having a family of them was surely even better.

"We'll see", was Lililethan's noncommittal reply.

Maribel just smiled and gave a slight bow before departing. As soon as the woman was out of sight Lily allowed her smile to drop and rose to her feet with a sigh.

Six months ago the news of a male dragon in the area would have thrilled her. Even a hotheaded young nomad might be convinced to stick around for a short time, and perhaps commit some night-time dalliances. Six months ago Lily would have danced with joy, now the most she could muster was a distant curiosity.

Even if she was indifferent about her visitor, she was at least polite enough to make herself presentable. Her constant consternation had distracted Lily from her regular bathing schedule, and there was noticeable grime dulling her normally glossy hide. A thorough scrub in the bath had her emerald scales gleaming once more, and her familiar citrusy scent hung in the air like a perfume. Lily was as prepared as she was going to get.

Flying over the shore was one of her favorite activities, so she took her time gaining altitude. The breeze coming off the water took on a chill as day transitioned slowly to nightfall. She turned westward to watch as the ocean lit up like a curtain of scarlet silk as the sun sunk below the horizon. It was such a beautiful view that it temporarily stole her attention away from the task at hand; thus she was somewhat surprised when a glance to the north showed the definite outline of a dragon just a few miles distant. He had arrived in less

than half the estimated time.

The male was flying considerably lower than her, and didn't seem to have spotted Lily, so she drifted northward on a lazy interception course. As the distance closed she was able to make out more details. He certainly was young, significantly smaller than herself. Fairly common hues of dusky red covered most of him, with streaks of coal black scales across his wings and sides. The flight muscles across his chest and back were quite well defined, and in fact he had apparently burned off most of the reserves of fat. He must have spent quite a bit of time in the air recently. An odd sort of pack was slung under his chest, strapped to his neck.

Masculine musk lingered in the air behind him, a strange but comforting mix of scents that reminded Lily of the temperate forests of home. She couldn't deny that he was a handsome youth, and for a moment she entertained a fantasy of luring him to stick around before memories and regrets of John soured such thoughts. It was obvious that she couldn't just hide behind him, so she began to slowly descend, falling into a flight path very nearby. "Hello!" She called out in forced cheer, raising her voice to be heard over the wind. The male whipped his head around in surprise at the sound. "May I ask what brings you to my home?"

The male stared at her blankly for a moment, but quickly recovered his composure, smiling pleasantly. He spoke with a thick accent, not at all local or familiar; "I am traveling to visit a friend."

Lily frowned in confusion. "I didn't think there were any other dragons in the area."

"Ah." He responded noncommittally, his easy smile still glued to his face. His eyes stayed almost uncomfortably on hers though. Lily put the question to the back of her mind for now. It would be easier to discuss his motives on the ground.

"Since you are here, perhaps you could share a meal with me? It has been an age since I have entertained another dragon."

He nodded almost eagerly. She had obviously guessed correctly that he would be famished. She angled down again, leading him toward the beach in front of her palace. Maribel had followed orders admirably: despite having arrived an hour early, the two dragons were greeted by a small feast laid out on tables hastily erected on the beach. A small troop of men and women scurried around the food. All of them wore billowing robes of light colored silks, neatly concealing that they were armed. Lily landed a short distance off

to avoid blowing sand over the gathering. Her guest landed just behind her; he looked briefly over the food before turning back to her with that same peculiar gaze.

Lily had long ago grown used to the idea that her body was bare to anyone who looked, but this male's eyes made her feel naked. "I'm sure you're hungry after that flight; help yourself." She gestured to the food in an attempt to distract him.

"Well, actually, there was something I wanted to say before I ate." He didn't get a chance to elaborate though; the human staff had started swarming towards them with platters of food even before the dust of landing had cleared. For a moment he attempted to ignore them, but they would have none of it. "Oh, if you insist." Obviously in a hurry, the unnamed male reluctantly sat back on his haunches and reached out to accept a large dish of meats and bread. He swiped the whole thing into his maw, chewing vigorously.

"You said your visit here was en route to a friend in the area?"

He chewed frantically and chugged wine to clear his mouth. "As I was trying to explain," he gasped, "I actually came here to see you."

She was silent for far too long after his declaration. "Oh." She finally muttered, her voice tinged with remorse. That remorse didn't go unnoticed by her guest, who tilted his head quizzically at her. Lily struggled to decide which way her feelings leaned on this statement. Part of her wanted to encourage his veiled proposal; another part wanted to scream that he was six months too late.

Before either of those responses could surface, he spoke again. "I think before you say anything, I need to show you this." He reached one hand up into that strange pack. A long minute passed where he shuffled unsuccessfully around its confines before he drew out a tiny little metal flask. Lily stared at it, feeling like she should recall the significance of this otherwise insignificant item. When the memory struck her, it was like a brick upside the head.

She recalled enchanting that silly little lump of metal and the liquor inside of it, moments before making the mistake that had haunted her these last months.

"Johnathan?" She blurted incredulously.

His face split in a toothy grin. "I couldn't let you get rid of me that easily."

The flood of confused emotions was too much for Lily to contain; despite

her best efforts to remain calm she came to all fours with her wings flared wide in aggravation. "What is going on here?"

Humans scattered from the area as she came to her feet in a potentially hostile motion. The dragon claiming to be John faltered for a moment before dropping the metal flask to hold out his hand imploringly. His voice was calm and soothing as he replied. "All I know is that when I got back I made my wish and drank the whiskey in the flask, and shortly afterwards I was a dragon." He took a step towards her, still hobbling weirdly on three legs, reaching out to her. "I knew I had to come back. I would have contacted you, but the guard chased me out of the city and I lost all my spells."

Lily was not one to falter under pressure, but the storm that was roaring through her mind was at hurricane levels. She could hardly focus on his words or her thoughts through the noise, but she managed to pluck a couple of questions out of the madness. Perhaps the most selfish one stuck at the forefront. "Did you want me to change you back?"

He shook his head emphatically. "No Lily. I don't want you to change me back. I want to be with you. If you'll let me, I'd like to show that I'm good enough to give you that family." A weight suddenly evaporated that she hadn't realized she was carrying. Somehow, both of her most pressing desires had been answered in one stroke. Slightly unsteady from emotion, she reached up with one clawed hand, accepting the outstretched limb. John smiled tenderly and pulled her into a very human hug, falling back on his rump to wrap both forelimbs around her. The embrace was unusual, but Lily accepted it willingly, laying her head cheek to cheek with him. She sucked in the aroma of moist bark and fertile earth that came off him, savoring the heat of his body against her. For a time, that was enough, just the two of them entwined on the soft sand of the beach. Slowly the long-absent touch of a male worked its way into her blood, igniting an itch that hadn't been scratched in far too long.

It started with little licks and love bites along his neck, but soon she was leveraging him back, until they collapsed in the cushion of the beach, him trapped beneath her. Lily licked the taste of his scales off her lips wordlessly and pulled back just enough to look him in the eyes. The need that she saw there mirrored her own, and she felt no need to speak her question aloud

She fell on him with months of pent up ardor, planting her lips against his and worming her tongue into his mouth. Desire took over; she rubbed against him in a serpentine writhing that betrayed her lust with each grinding motion

of her loins. John groaned into her mouth, responding to her motions with the utmost approval. Lily slowed and forced herself to calm before things got too far beyond her control; she wanted to draw this night out as long as she could. Reluctantly, she broke their kiss, panting in his face momentarily before peeling herself out of John's embrace. She only parted with him long enough to rotate in place, so that her backside was hovering over his face in an obvious invitation. Her eyes drank in the sight of the swelling crease in the scales of his crotch, his arousal already peeking out of its shelter. She licked her lips before bending her neck and letting her tongue tickle the cute sprout of pink skin emerging from his scales.

John's reaction was immediate and powerful. His hips jerked upward at her and he hands gripped her flanks. She continued her teasing, ignoring his growing erection, but licking the area around it. This torture wouldn't go unanswered though. John tightened his grip on her rump, lifting himself up to bury his nose in her sex. While Lily had been light and teasing, John seemed uninterested in lengthy foreplay. The thick, slick heat of his tongue slipped right past the folds of her sex to explore the more delicate flesh inside. At the same time he forced his snout firmly against her, as though he was trying to push that into her as well. Her stomach fluttered at the sudden intrusion, and her canal flexed and tightened reflexively. She forced herself to relax and enjoy the attention.

Under other circumstance, Lililethan might have been upset by this forcefulness, but in this case she wasn't truly in the mood for taking it slow. What her body was really yearning for at the moment was hardly better than rutting, and she was barely able to restrain herself. Seeing John's eagerness was a match for her own, Lily had no qualms about speeding things along. Her tongue snaked down and into his vent, encircling his cock down to the root. John shuddered under her, but if he made any noise it was muffled against her crotch. With Lily's careful nursing, his erection surged from his body to point needily skyward. Years had passed since she had last handled a male of her own species, but from her memories this was the genuine article.

The tip was flattened out into a teardrop with a small dimpled opening in the center, and the first few inches of the shaft leafed out like the petals of some sort of exotic flower. The whole length had soft spongy hooks that tickled her tongue as it explored. She wrapped one hand lovingly around it, feeling the wild pulse of John's heartbeat. The stroking coaxed a thick bead of fluid from him, which she paused to lap up, savoring the tang of him and

smiling devilishly at the shivering reaction it elicited. Though he was momentarily stunned by the sensation, he quickly recovered and returned the favor, extending his tongue to its fullest and lashing the point against the back wall of her sex. Lily chirped in happy alarm, her toes curling in the sand on either side of John's head. For a moment her hips wavered as she fought the urge to hump down at his face. She could feel her dampness dripping, running down John's muzzle as he pleasured her.

Excitement was obviously getting the better of John, judging by the steady stream of pre dribbling from him and leaving a glistening trail on the scales of her wrist. His hips twitched up at her, pistoning his cock into her closed fist. Lily chuckled at him and let him molest her hand for the moment, occasionally giving him a lick as he jabbed through her grip. It seemed as though he would do all the work himself, when Lily was taken by surprise; a powerful spurt of his spunk landed right across her nostrils, inundating her with his heady smell. She gave a greedy rumbling growl. She licked off the sticky gob, but it wasn't enough to satisfy her now. She pulled her hand back. John's hips kept humping, and he whined in dissatisfaction. He didn't wait long however, Lily quickly engulfed him in her mouth, just barely letting her teeth slide over the sensitive contours of his shaft. He jerked and twitched under her in fits of bliss, and this time his yowls of pleasure were clearly audible. Her tongue slurped messily as she pulled him further in until he bumped against the back of her throat. Lily let him linger there a moment before tipping her head back and swallowing him completely, until her nose was nestled into his vent. John grunted and bucked desperately into her throat.

A heavy purr escaped Lily while she suckled powerfully on the textured flesh in her mouth. She swallowed rapidly to stimulate the part of him that was lodged in her throat. The frantic lashing of his tongue inside of her was working magically; the familiar tightness in her belly and loins signaled an impending climax. John must have taken a hint from the way her insides were quaking, because he decided to finish her off with a bang. He wrapped both hands around the top of her tail and hauled down, pushing his head up powerfully. With a lewd and loud squelch, the end of his muzzle sank into her. At the same time his tongue flicked up to that spongy button of flesh on the roof of her sex.

Lily's eyes went wide as she squealed in shock around his manhood. She couldn't hold back the urge this time, and humped his face shamelessly,

working the slicked scales of his snout deeper into her. The thunderstruck blankness of orgasm washed all the thoughts from her head and left only the heady lust of the act and the carnal need to keep going. It was only after conscious though returned and her high faded that she could stop the movement of her hips, and release the deathgrip her loins had on John's face. He extracted himself from her, and soon there was a satisfied smacking of lips as he enjoyed the copious fruits of his labors.

She pulled off of him with a soft gurgling, thick strands of saliva still slung between his organ and her mouth. Lily's knees quaked as she stood up and carefully changed position, getting face to face with John once again. He was still licking her juices from his face, the corners of his mouth curled up in a discreet smile. She was about to remark on his smugness when something else caught her attention. The humans that had been serving the meal were still standing next to the erected tables, not more than a stone's throw away: Lily had never dismissed them. Most stood with their backs to the couple, but Mirabel and several others looked on in open approval.

Lily returned his smile with her own bare-toothed grin, "Let's hope you can perform for an audience." She quipped, lowering her hips slowly so that his spit-shined member slid up between her thighs. It caught in the natural grove at the base of her tail, sliding along the slickened scales to nestle against her lips.

John's smile turned quizzical as he followed her gaze until he spotted the spectators. He opened his mouth the object, but she did give him a chance. She pressed the length of her body to his in a combination of pin and embrace before angling her hips down and impaling herself on him. The strange shapes of his manhood snagged in her, tugging in the best of ways. She gave no respite; the moment her hips touched his, she lifted up again, only a few inches, and pushed back down, starting a deep and rapid pace immediately. She had forgotten how deliciously intense it was to be with another dragon. The strange curves and shapes of John's maleness filled all the right spots every time she ground her hips down, and the spongy little spines dragged like fingers across her insides every time she lifted away. Panting, tongue lolling out of her mouth, Lily's pace became frenzied. John's concern with the humans vanished as he was overcome by lust. He reached up to grab the bases of her wings like hand holds as she rode him. The muted smacking of his tail against the sound was drowned out by the much more messy sound of her crotch slapping against his.

Unfortunately it couldn't last. John had been close to orgasm already from the Lily's mouth, and Lily was still reeling and sensitive. All those spines started to get firmer, and the length of his shaft started to throb inside her. Lily slammed down one last time, so that not one inch of him was left exposed.

Lily shuddered as she felt his cock swell up, the head blossoming out and locking him in place, stretching her almost painfully. The blistering heat of his orgasm exploded in her depths. The feeling of his cum spreading inside of her sent Lily tumbling into another climax. Her breath caught in her throat as she ground her hips down, trying to get even another fraction of an inch of penetration. By the time the fog of bliss cleared, her lungs were aching for air and her legs were on the verge of giving out. With a sigh she rolled to her side, wrapping her arms and legs around John to pull him along. He was still trembling and groaning, and she could feel him pulsing inside her with an ongoing orgasm.

"What?" He gasped at her as she felt yet another surge of warm semen splash into her.

Breathless herself, Lily smiled as she panted in his face. "I see you haven't had this pleasure yet." She wrapped an arm around his neck and pulled him close to kiss him. Even in his state of quasi-distress John accepted the gesture, calming slightly at the comfort she offered him. "Relax darling, it's normal. It will pass in a few minutes. I wouldn't plan on going anywhere for the next hour though." She emphasized the statement with a tiny tug of her hips, and shivered at the feeling of her sex being pulled pleasantly by the spines of his penis; he was in her as surely as if glued there.

She kissed him once more and purred in satisfaction as he gave one more spurt inside her. All that wonderfully hot seed was staying just where it was supposed to, just where it was needed to ensure conception. "John, thank you. I had thought I had lost you, but you've come back and you've given me the most amazing gift." She paused, testing the three word she was about to utter. "I love you."

He turned his chin up to look at her with undisguised appreciation. He tried to say something in return, but the throes of pleasure turned it into an unintelligible mumble. "Love you." He finally managed to respond in an almost drunken slur. It was enough for Lily. She wrapped her wing around him to shelter him from the gaze of the humans, and slowly slipped into the most comfortable slumber she'd experienced in decades.

A Passage of Time

Tiny impacts of tiny paws upon Johnathan's tail stirred him from his slumber. Tiny voices lowered to a conspiratorial whisper tickled his ears and the words brought a familiar blend of exasperation and amusement into his slowly waking thoughts.

"Blue was better."

"Uh-uh, purple is prettier."

John slowly cracked one eyelid, staring down the length of his body towards the whispers of his son and daughter. They were partially obscured by the coil of Lily's tail thrown over his belly, but he could see well enough to make out the paw-prints of purple paint scattered up and down the scarlet scales of his tail and haunches. The two children were in the process of repeating the pattern on their mother. The garish paint clashed horribly with Lily's green hide, and John had to stifle a laugh to avoid alerting them.

Closing his eye again, he was tempted to try and go back to sleep and let the two play their game. That temptation was removed by the feeling of Lily's tongue tickling the back of his ears. "It seems the children are up." A sudden giggling followed immediately after her statement.

"Mom, we made you and dad pretty!" This time John couldn't suppress his laughter and slowly pushed himself upright. His son was squatting down on the top of Lily's thigh, trying to balance as she began to shift. His daughter was crouched in the space between Lily's belly and John's back, still in the process of painting her mother's feet.

Two beautiful melds of their mother and father.

Laurelie was a miniature slender copy of her mother, covered predominantly with the same emerald green scales, interrupted occasionally with poorly defined tiger stripes of red. At birth the red scales had been amorphous patches, but it seemed that as she grew they became more refined. She had John's steely blue-gray eyes though.

While John had gotten to name their daughter, Lily had named their son. Banzhrakin, or Ban as John called him, was named in honor of Lily's brother. Like his sister, he had inherited the same glossy green scales over much of his body. He had taken a little bit more of his father's red though. Plated scales of cardinal red covered his throat, chest, belly, and the webs of his wings. He was bulkier than his sister. Even now at only a few years old it was

apparent that he would become quite the powerful adult.

Both of them were surprisingly small, not even the size of an adult human. John couldn't believe how small they had been at birth. After nearly two years of pregnancy, Lily still had only barely showed any extra size, and when she had informed him that it was time, she had suffered no difficulty birthing the two mewling wyrmlings. It would take decades before they were anywhere near the size of their parents.

"Look at you two!" Lily chided as she rose to her feet, sending Ban tumbling to the cushions of their bed. "Such a mess! I think a bath is in order." Both children squealed in mock terror and attempted to bolt at the threat of a bath, but not fast enough. Lily seized Ban carefully in her jaws while John trapped Laurelie with his tail before sweeping her up onto his back.

Despite their fidgeting and pleading, they were given no reprieve as they were carried to Lily's enormous bathing pool. Lily unceremoniously dropped Ban into the bath, and rather than suffer the same fate Laurelie jumped in herself. Both of them were immediately surrounded by a cloud of purple paint as they paddled around the shallow water. John and Lily slipped in after them and attempted to remove the numerous paw-prints from one another.

"What do you want for breakfast this morning children?"

"Melons!"

"Eggs!"

"Cheese!"

"Sausage!"

The two of them continued calling out additions to their banquet as they splashed each other.

"Well you'd better stop playing and start washing, or you won't be eating anything." John's threat had the immediate effect of sending them racing to the side of the pool for soap.

John chuckled and lounged back against his wife. Lily hummed and leaned in to nibble at his cheeks. "We're going to have to ask Maribel to watch them again soon I think." Lily's voice was husky as she whispered to him. "I've been feeling an itch for some quality time."

John closed his eyes and rubbed his face against Lily's. It had taken a while to get used to intimacy without the use of his forelimbs; they lacked the range and flexibility of human arms. "I talked to the foreman last week," John mumbled back, "he said that the new home should be done before the end of

winter. Then they'll have their own room.”

"That will be nice. We should have started construction earlier. Six years is too long for them to stay in the same bed as us.”

"Mmm. We'll have plenty of time to make up for it.” He replied, flicking his tongue across her lips.

A sudden gout of water stunned them both, "Ewwww!” Ban declared forcefully at their kissing and smacked tail across the water to splash them again.

Lily grumbled playfully and plunged one wing down into the water like a wedge, sending a tidal wave toward the wide-eyed youngster. Ban tumbled in the water as the current carried him into the center of the pool before coming up spluttering and spitting soapy water. John had been surprised at the buoyancy of young dragons.

"Okay, I think bath time is over.” John scooped his son out of the water before the splash fight could escalate any further. Laurelie scrambled out herself, teasing her brother about getting dunked.

She was abruptly silenced as John dropped a massive towel over her head. "Hey!”

"Hurry up and dry off, your mother and I are going outside to get some sun.”

In their unaltered forms the two adults were simply too large for a towel to be practical.

The air outside sent a chilly shiver down John's spine. Winter on the Blazing coast was not the harsh snow-packed season of his homeland, but it was still cold enough to be uncomfortable on wet scales. He settled in alongside Lily as the weak winter sun beamed down at them, slowly warming them to more tolerable levels.

"Another letter from your parents arrived. They want to know when they can see their grandchildren.” Lily spoke quietly, nuzzling against him once more now that they had some peace.

John sighed, "I know we should make the trip over there, but I just...” he trailed off, and finished with a shrug. "It's just going to be so awkward.”

Shortly after coming back to Lily, the emerald dragoness sent an official delegation to John's homeland. They carried a small crate of exquisitely polished pearls and a larger crate of silks and spices to be sold or bartered as reparation for the damage that John had caused in his escape. After much negotiation John was cleared of the charges related to demon summoning and

given permission to return under supervision.

In addition, the delegation had carried private letters to John's family. He had explained in his letter how he had been bespelled into the body of a dragon and had taken up as consort to Lily. For a long time no correspondence came back. Just days after Lily had given birth, a letter finally arrived by ship. It made it clear that although John's departure had caused hardship in the family business, John was still a part of the family.

Regular exchanges had filled the time since then, and once his parents had learned that they were grandparents, they had been insistent on him returning, at least temporarily.

"Love, you are not going to use that as an excuse. It's been almost a decade since you've been home. Things are stable enough here that I can afford to leave with you, but that won't always be the case. We should go. It will be late summer there, we can stay until the end of the season, and when we come back our home will be finished."

With a resigned grumble John nodded, "All right, all right. How long will it take you to get the transport prepared?" It had taken John months to fly a land route from his homeland to the Blazing Coast. A ship would take nearly a month to make the nearest port and another week of flight overland. It was safer and faster for Lily to prepare a transport circle.

"I can have it ready by the end of the week."

John nodded. "I'll slip a letter back to them."

Thorough experimentation had proven beyond a doubt that Johnathan's transformation was complete and permanent. He was a dragon, and had been gifted a dragon's increased capacity to alter the reality of the world around him. Lily had been training him to harness the ability, but John was a long way from being able to conduct the delicate preparations for a total transport of living creatures. He was however, capable of sending very small objects mostly intact across nearly any distance.

"Good. I have to admit, I'm looking forward to seeing more of your home than a room in the cellar of the palace."

John smirked despite himself and draped one wing across Lily's back. "You're going to have to shift both of our sized down too love. There's not a building in the whole region large enough to house two adult dragons."

"What barbarians!" Lily teased. "What sort of uncivilized country has no dragons?"

"Only the most horrid of places. Let's not go there."

"Oh no, we must! We must bring them the enlightenment of our most majestic selves."

John rolled his eyes, "Ok, that's enough of that."

"What, you don't think I'm majestic?"

John twisted, pushing the larger dragoness onto her back and rolling atop her so that he straddled her and looked down into her eyes. "Mountains are majestic, the sea is majestic. Beautiful, clever, brilliant, exotic? Those are all words I would use to describe you. I'm afraid I can't include majestic though."

"Well, you're silly. A silly fool that can't recognize that a dragon is far more majestic than simple mountains. Mountains! Just a bunch of rocks."

"Maybe, but I'm your silly fool. You're stuck with me."

Lily sniffed. "I suppose I'll live."

John smiled and bent down to touch his nose to hers, breathing in her breath.

"Are you wrestling again?"

The excited question darted through the air just moments ahead of Laurelie. The youngling scampered across the stone of the overlook to clamber up John's back, followed shortly by her brother.

"Dad's winning!"

A flutter of mortifying memories froze John in place. Memories of one of their desperate attempts at intimacy when the two of them thought the children were asleep. They had been caught in a reverse position, on the very same overlook, with Lily straddling John in a very compromising fashion. Only the vast cover of their wings and the lame excuse of wrestling had saved them from truly difficult questions.

"No dear one, your father was just telling me how majestic I look."

"What's `Jestic?"

"Dragons are majestic of course. Now hurry down, I'm sure Maribel has breakfast set up already."

Still chattering, Ban and Laurelie hopped from the heights of John's back. They were too young yet for proper flight, but they spread their wings in a long glide that took them all the way to the stairs of the overlook.

"Another year I think before we'll have to take them up. I was eight years old when my parents taught me, but they've been learning faster than I did."

The thought of taking the two children up into the sky made John's heart clench with worry, but he knew it was inevitable. It would be a terrible shame

for him to rob his own children of the joy that was flying.

Reluctantly, John rolled away from the warmth of Lily's body and stood. "I guess we better get some breakfast. We both have things to do if we're going to make the trip.”

"Don't look so glum about it. Trust me; things are going to be fine.”

Returning to One's Roots

"Is this really necessary Lily?" The green dragoness danced in circles about him adjusting the outfit she had foisted upon him. It was the day of their departure, that morning the two of them had collaborated on a spell to reduce themselves and the children to a more manageable size. John and Lily were roughly horse size, though Lily remained slightly larger. Laurelie and Ban were about the size of a human child. The children were ecstatic with the change. They had already grasped the mechanics of using their decreased size to increase their capacity for mayhem.

"I am going to look ridiculous." John complained as Lily affixed the last of the ensemble over his tail. Shimmering green silk covered most of his body, affixed by silver loops to his horns. It wrapped his neck in a loose sleeve before splitting in two. One half ran down his back between his wings and the other was pulled tight across his chest and belly. Both sides were joined by large toggles several feet down his tail. As if that wasn't enough decoration, Lily had pierced each of his ears with two small platinum studs bearing an emerald on one side and a ruby on the other.

"One stud for each of our children," she had explained.

She kissed him with a smile. "You do not look ridiculous, you look stately. Besides, I am wearing the same thing. Do I look ridiculous?" John had been very approving of the way that Lily's gown had accentuated her shape. Her silks were bright red, and she wore two golden hoops in each ear instead of studs.

"Of course not love, but you're meant to wear this type of thing. I feel like a fop."

"Stop being so self-conscious John! You're nervous about meeting your family after so long, but I am a queen and you are my husband, and on our first trip to a foreign nation we need to look the part. Besides, you helped me with the enchantments on all of this; you know it's more than decoration."

John sagged in glum defeat. "I know," he muttered, "but I still feel silly."

"That's because you are silly," She kissed him again. "This is important John. You know your homeland better than I. They're going to expect two beasts and their get, not a royal convoy."

The red dragon breathed deeply and nodded, trying to wipe the displeasure from his face before bumping his nose against his wife's. "You're right. I'm

just anxious.”

Lily smiled kindly and reached up to stroke his cheek. The forms they had taken were similar to the hybrid form she'd adopted during their first meeting, with more flexible hands and the ability to adopt an upright posture for sitting and standing. "Don't worry too much. We've taken every precaution we can think of. "

John leaned into her touch, "You look lovely by the way.”

"I know.” They remained that way for just a moment before Lily pulled away. "Why don't you take the children outside while I finish? I'll be along in a minute.”

"Ban, Laurelie, time to go!” John called.

"Dad! We're playing!” Laurelie hollered as she came tearing around the corner, her own white silk outfit rippling. Maribel trotted after a moment later with Ban pinned helplessly against her chest. She had him trapped with his forelimbs tucked against his belly and his feet held in her other hand. The young dragon grunted and wriggled as much as he could manage, to no avail.

"No fair! I'm smaller now! You have to play fair!”

"Indeed you are smaller. Just means you have to be smarter.” Maribel advised sagely. "I have to admit Sir,” she looked up at John, "they're easier to manage this small. Sure you can't just leave them this way?”

"We might have to if they don't behave themselves.”

"No!” Ban wailed in horror, "We're done playing Dad! I promise.”

Laurelie did a quick turn to come back and but her head against John's leg in apology. A pang of guilt went through him. "Don't worry; this is only while we visit. But we need to go, your mother is almost ready.” Maribel let her prisoner go, and the two younger dragons trotted alongside their father as he led them outdoors. Fortunately the horror of John's faux threat wore off quickly and they were soon giggling about how funny wearing clothes was. They wore simple outfits, little more than billowing shirts that clasped over the neck and tail with the sides completely open for their limbs. Despite their protests to the contrary, Lily and John had insisted they were too young for any sort of piercings. Out in the plaza overlooking the beach Lily had been working on their transportation.

Years ago, when Johnathan had set up the summoning circle it had provided a beacon for Lily and allowed for her easy teleportation. With only two people to move it had consumed little energy. Without someone on the other end to give them such a beacon Lily had use a much more complex

sorcery. Under her tutelage, John had discovered that much of magic was a bizarre blend of the known and the unknowable. Things arcane and scientific fact worked in a rough harmony for many spells.

An arch of battered and greening copper was erected at the far end of the plaza. Wider than a wagon and four yards tall, it was surrounded by a huge array of mirrors and lenses. Behind it was a chalk-board filled with the parameters of the spell. Altitudes, star charts, weather patterns, and nearby landmarks had been worked into the casting. Because miscalculations could send the group hundreds of miles off course, it had all been checked repeatedly for mistakes, and was all under constant watch by Lily's most trusted guards.

John wished that he had spent more time learning the names of some of the people that worked for Lily. He was glad that he recognized the current officer on duty. "Good evening Tobias." The young man gave John a customary stern nod. "Lililethan will be out momentarily if you could get everything in position."

"Of course." With a few shouted orders Tobias and the other dozen guards quickly arranged the gathered mirrors to capture the late afternoon sunlight and funnel it into the large lenses, which then focused that light into glaring beams that lanced into the copper archway. The brilliant light was enough to force John to look away or risk blinding himself. Instead he turned to the wooden board holding the map of their imminent journey.

Lily's kingdom was far from the place of his birth, and the map made that abundantly clear. They would travel eight-thousand, five-hundred and fifty-one miles. The Blazing Coast was so far from his home that it lay on opposite sides of the day in opposite seasons. As the late winter sun prepared to dip behind the horizon to the west here, the late summer sun would be only an hour from rising in his homeland.

The sound of many footsteps drew his attention from the maps; Lily and her entourage were approaching. Mirabel, a score of her soldiers, along with hired singers, dancers, cooks, and several local scholars that wanted the chance to study far-flung places. Some seventy people in total approached the archway, squinting or shielding their eyes.

"Ready my love?" Lily asked quietly as she stopped next to John.

"I'm as ready as I'm going to get."

She nodded and looked on towards the gate. John's sense of her magic had evolved enormously over the years. He could feel and see the small probing

ripple as she reached out to the gate, testing how much heat the copper had soaked up. She made a few fine adjustments to the mirrors and lenses and then they waited. Minutes ticked by as she continuously checked the progress, until the copper was aglow with a dull cherry red and the air around it was rolling with heat. Without warning the small probe of her spell surged, wrapping around the archway and tearing at the space under it. With a sound the air itself was ripping apart the gate came to life.

In an instant all the gathered heat was sucked away to power the spell; a hissing layer of thick ice formed on every surface. Through the arch, John could no longer see the other side of the plaza; instead a picture of another place appeared and a rush of air rolled through, rich with the smell of moss, grass, and cattle.

"Hurry everyone, we've only minutes." Lily chivied people through the gate. Mirabel took the lead with her guard. "Tobias, get the rest of the supplies ready. We'll reopen the gate from the other side as soon as we are able."

The soldier bowed, "Of course My Lady."

Once the last of the humans were through the gate Lily flashed her husband an encouraging smile and moved ahead. John ushered the children behind her and brought up the rear. Sucking in one last fortifying breath, he stepped through the gate.

Late in the summer the air in the Lead Hills was already getting crisp at night. It was not so cool that a frost would form but cool enough to give a chill to anyone caught in the open. The cold air brought with it the mixed smells of agriculture: ripe fruit, manure, and cut barley all fought for space in John's nose. Rolling grassy hills spread for miles in a broad valley. Down in the center of that valley walls and towers climbed up towards the night sky, all alight with the glow of civilization.

Pastock, John's home city, had consumed several hills with its sprawl of buildings. Moonlight glittered off of the river that cut through the city like a shifting silver ribbon. At the apex of the tallest of the hills stood the citadel that was Pastock Palace, home to the House of Lords, the highest governing body. More of a fortress than anything else, it loomed over the city like a blackened stone behemoth, pocked and scarred by the sieges of years past. A massive hexagonal tower in the center of the palace rose some hundred feet above the next tallest building in the town. On the top level of that tower were the great guns of Pastock: six enormous cannons per side, each

throwing a hundred pound shot up to a mile from the city walls.

"It certainly is different." Lily's quiet remark broke John's thoughts.

"It's an impressive piece of masonry. Does that wall go around the entire city?" Maribel chimed in. Like most of the battle-mages in Lily's honor guard, Maribel had altered her own body in a number of ways; increasing the acuity of her eyes in low-light was one of them.

"It goes around the whole city proper. Most of the estates and farms around here have their own walls, of either stone or wood." John nodded his head to the various settlements dotting the hillsides around them.

Maribel whistled, impressed. "Must have torn down a mountain to get all that stone"

"Much of the stone is a byproduct of the mines in the area. We've been digging lead and silver out of these hills for centuries. As the mines have gotten deeper we use the stone they cut away to build. Over generations, this is the result. Whenever the city got too big for the walls, they built new walls." John looked around to get his bearings. So much had changed since he'd last been here. The city was bigger and there were new farms in the area. Eventually he lined himself up and started them on a course uphill and north of the city. With a soft fading snap, their gateway closed behind them.

"Each district of the city is separated by older generations of walls." John talked as he walked. "There are five districts in total, and then the slums outside the walls. All of the richest citizens live in the center district. Everything there has been torn down and rebuilt into mansions and commercial zones. Each district out from that gets a bit poorer, until you get to the people who can't afford to build inside the city."

"And where did you live?" Maribel asked curiously.

"My family has a house in the second district. It's tiny, just a place to conduct official business. Our actual home was out in the hills here, just ahead. Lily was very accurate, most of this area belongs to my parents but the estate itself is on the other slope. We'll see it once we hit the top."

"Riders, coming from the city." One of the guards in the rear interrupted John's lecture. Looking back over his shoulder he saw that there was in fact a column of cavalry streaming from one of the gates. They were too far off to see John and Lily's group but they seemed to be heading straight towards the gateway that had just closed. A spell of that magnitude would have alerted every mage for miles.

"John, you're sure that your parents alerted the local authorities that we

were coming?” Lily whispered.

"Absolutely.”

"Shall we wait for them to get to us?” Maribel asked warily.

John considered the situation for a moment, "Lily, we're nearly to my home. If there is any misunderstanding, it may be easier if my parents can help explain.”

"Probably our best course of action. Let's hurry.” The dragons entered a slow trot, and the group of followers was soon huffing and puffing from the climb and the altitude, while Laurelie and Ban ran as fast as their small legs could carry them. As sensitive as always to the attitude of the adults around them, the two children were fussy and nervous. "Mom,” Ban's voice was plaintive and sporadic as he panted, "are those bad people?”

John stopped for a moment to snatch his daughter up and deposit her on Lily's back.

"No love,” Lily murmured tenderly after she had settled Banzhrakin between John's wings. "They're not bad people. They just might be confused people.”

"Oh.” Ban seemed comforted though it was clear he didn't comprehend the explanation.

"What's confused?” He asked, standing upright, clinging to John's green silken tunic.

"Confused is when you think something that isn't true.”

"Oh. What do they confused?” He asked, not quite grasping the word.

"They don't know us. They might think that *we're* bad people.”

"Hey! We're not bad people,” Laurelie squealed indignantly.

"Hush love, hush. We'll tell them soon enough.” They reached the top of the hill, and John was stunned to see a very tall stone wall that stretched along the crest in both directions for several hundred feet.

"More walls?” Mirabel asked incredulously.

"This is new.” John replied. The home that he knew had been halfway down the other side of the hill, just a single house and barn with a short privacy wall and acres of blueberry fields surrounding it. "Come on,” John followed the wall towards a small fortified gate not far from them. In the distance the sound of galloping horses grew.

"Hello?” John knocked heavily on the gate. "Is anyone awake?”

Silence was his only answer. "Oh bugger me.” John grumbled.

"Language love.” Lily gave a meaningful glance at her son, who was

fortunately too occupied looking back down towards the approaching cavalry.

"Lily, take Ban for me please."

Once Lily had Ban dangling by the back of his neck from her jaws John reared up and grasped the top of the wall with his forelimbs. With a grunt he sprung his powerful hind legs and vaulted over the wall quite easily. Thankfully this wall was sturdier than the last one he attempted to climb. Grass burst into the air around him as he landed with a soft thump in the soft soil on the other side of the wall and found himself standing in front of a rather startled looking cow.

"Mooooo." The cow lowed scornfully as it trotted off to join a small herd of its sisters.

Faint doubts trickled into John's mind. His family hadn't owned cows before. Where they even at the right estate? Had it been so long that he had forgotten how to find his home? But no, the sky had looked right, all the hills had been the same, and the familiar smell of his mother's blueberry fields filled the air. It had to be home, or so John told himself. A heavy iron luck hung from the latch holding the gate closed. John growled in annoyance and grasped it in one hand, giving a soft tug that twisted the iron until it snapped and popped free. Thankful for the absurd strength of dragons, he tossed the wrecked lock aside and opened the gate.

"Everyone inside please."

Lily came through first, setting both children down before tossing a wry smile at her husband. "Not exactly our grand dignified entrance is it love?"

"Not exactly no."

"Oh bugger me." Ban happily contributed.

Once everyone was through John closed the gate again, and they stood for a moment in silence as the sound of cavalry grew, and then faded. "Well, thanks for that." John sighed in relief.

Lantern light leaped out from the depths of the estate, filtering through an orchard of trees and outlining the forms of restless cows, disrupting and sense of relief.

"Bugger." John said again.

"Bugger!" Ban agreed wholeheartedly.

"Who's out here? I know someone's hiding out here, you've spooked the cows!"

Though it had been years, John still recognized his sister's voice calling

into the night. Relief trickled through him, followed by a renewed nervousness. "Andrea?" He called back, uncertainly.

The lantern stopped moving, and at first there was no answer back, "John?" She sounded equally uncertain.

"Of course it's John! Didn't you all get the message that I would be coming?"

"Yes we got the message you ass!" The lantern bobbed as Andrea camp stomping and crunching through the small pasture towards them. "Somehow, we just assumed you would use the front gate like a civilized-oh my word!" Whatever she was going to say died on her lips as her lantern finally illuminated John and Lily. Nerveless fingers slipped and a moment later the lantern clattered to the ground, sputtering slightly but not quite dying.

"Hello Andrea." John said gently.

"It is nice to meet you Andrea." Lily echoed after.

"Hello angry lady!" Laurelie yelled sincerely.

"Bugger!" Ban announced once more.

With the glare of the lantern no longer hiding her, Andrea was plainly visible staring open mouthed at them. The hem of her long night gown and her boots were caked with mud from the pasture. When John has left he had still considered Andrea his baby sister but she was the same age now as John had been when he'd left. Long strands of sleep-tangled brown hair framed her face, her skin pale and afraid in the moonlight.

"Andrea," John spoke in a soft prod, but his sister wouldn't answer. She kept looking between them in absolute shock. John felt like he was shriveling up inside as his fears played out before him. "Andrea, please say something." He took a small step forward, but she took a step back. Before he could stop her, she stumbled, flailed her arms, and tipped backwards. Too far away to save her, John could only watch with instant misery as she sailed through the air and landed on her rump in the grass and mud of the cow pasture.

Ban and Laurelie laughed in glee, greatly amused by the loud smacking splat that Andrea had made on impact. "Do it again Angry Lady!" Ban demanded gleefully.

Andrea stared at the young dragon as fear and confusion warred on her face, eventually giving over to some sort of bemused anger. "You brat!" She scowled up at John, "Do you have any idea how terrifying it is to stumble across bloody dragons in the dark?"

Vague memories of his first encounter with Lily surfaced; he declined to

mention them. "I'm sorry Andy. We didn't mean to scare you."

"You could have warned me!"

"My dear," Lily interjected before the exchange could progress too far, "my name is Lililethan, Queen of the Blazing Coast. I apologize for the fright, but there was some confusion during our arrival. Could you please bring us to your parents?"

Calm rapidly descended over Andrea as years of courtly instinct kicked in. "Of course my lady!" She struggled to get to her feet and gave a yelp when Lily's tail curled around her shoulders and hoisted her upright. "Thank you my lady," she swallowed a lump of terror and gave as good a curtsy as could be expected in a muddy nightgown and boots before turning around to lead them onwards.

The children giggled again as Andrea turned, revealing a great green and brown stain of mud and grass on the back of her nightgown. "Mud butt!" Ban whispered, not very quietly.

"Ban, be nice! That is your aunt!" John hissed.

Andrea stiffened and missed a step, nearly falling again. "They're yours?" She asked over her shoulder, looking frantic.

"Mine and Lily's yes."

Andrea's eyes skipped between the four of them before she swallowed and adopted an expression of perfect fury only training could provide.

"That's right. I'm your aunt Andrea. Around here, I handle the kitchen and all the sweets. If I hear another peep out of either of you about my butt, you'll both be eating stale bread and water until you leave."

While Ban gasped with horror and snapped his mouth shut, John and Lily shared a brief glance of shared amusement before forcing neutral expressions.

"Can she do that mom?" Laurelie asked skeptically.

"Absolutely. This is her home."

Andrea gave an appraising look at Lily before nodding. "There you have it. Your own mother wouldn't lie to you, so you'd best behave." John held his tongue as his children suddenly grew more wary of their aunt.

As they walked, Andrea pointed out the expansions they'd made over the years. When John has been snared by Lily the first time the estate had been one generously sized home surrounded by fruit fields with a couple of horses for plowing. Now it was a fully working farm. Cattle slept in their pasture, a full stable stood nearby, and an orchard filled in most of the space between. Even the house had grown, with a second wing extending from the southern

wall.

The front of the house was now filled with an elaborate garden and a cobbled carriage loop, currently illuminated by a number of lamps. "We set the lamps out earlier, seeing as how we expected you to come through the front gate," Andrea said pointedly. "Wait here; I'll go get mom and dad."

John tried to force his pessimism down, but braced himself none the less when the door opened again and his parents emerged, sending John's heart to his throat. Both of them had aged visibly since he'd left. His mother's golden brown hair had turned nearly all gray, and his father's head was mostly bald. The two of them were both looking worn and lined, but when the two of them looked at him they gave him a tentative smile.

"Hello Dad, hello Mom." John forced the words past the block in his chest.

"Hello John." The older man replied with similar difficulty.

Johnathan's mother on the other hand had few reservations. With tears building in her eyes, she came rushing down the stairs and threw her arms around his neck. "John!" Johnathan hesitated a moment, but only a moment, before wrapping one arm around his mother.

"I was starting to think we'd never see you again."

John's father made a slower pace down the steps, and stopped to bow to Lily. "Ma'am, my name is Albert Wright, and that is my wife, Victoria Wright. I uh-" he paused to clear his throat, "I'm glad to finally meet you. Your generosity has helped out family immensely."

Lily smiled and nodded her head. "It was the least I could do for my husband's family. I am glad to have helped."

Albert cleared his throat and nodded awkwardly, his hands fidgeting at his sides in discomfort. Just as he opened his mouth to say something the visitor's bell on the front gate rang out into the night. "Who in all hell is calling this early in the morning." Albert fumed.

"It's the Lancers." John informed him, gently parting from his mother's embrace.

"What?"

"A company of them came out of the city as we arrived."

Albert frowned, "Of course they did." He did not sound pleased. "Wait here John. Ma'am." He bowed again to Lily and strode boldly to the gate.

John frowned and looked after; he wanted to follow his father, but his mother's hand on his shoulder stopped him. "Your father can take care of it John, just wait."

"Who's there?" Albert called out over the gate.

"I am Captain Albright, of the Lancers. May we enter?"

"This early in the morning? No I think not sir."

There was a moment of stunned silence. "Sir, the Magisters assure me that a gateway has opened very near to your estate."

"And what of it?"

"Sir," the captain didn't sound at all happy to John, "did anyone enter your estate this morning?"

"If they did Captain, I'm sure it's no business of yours. If the gateway was for anyone I know, I'm sure that I've already informed the watch and the Magisters. If they didn't inform you, nothing I can do to help. I'm afraid you'll just have to ride back to the city and take it up with them. Good night." Before the captain could respond Albert simply turned and started walking back from the gate.

A number of mumbled insults drifted from beyond the estate's walls, some foul enough to make Johnathan bristle in offense, but his father seemed to not hear or not care. "Sorry about that my boy. The skullduggery hasn't stopped since you've left."

"What do you mean?"

"It's nothing John; nothing to mention. We've better topics for discussion right now. What say you introduce your mother and I to our grandchildren." He smiled down at Ban and Laurelie, who had been watching the exchange warily

Lily nudged them forward. "Say hello children. This is your John's father, your grandfather."

Both children looked skeptically between Albert and John.

"Nuh-uh!" Ban finally declared.

Albert broke into uproarious laughter, nearly doubling over. "I can hardly believe it myself!" He whooped. "Oh the day the magisters came to the house and tried to explain what had happened, I was sure the whole world had gone insane."

John found himself laughing as well.

"It wasn't until all your people arrived with a whole bushel of pearls that I realized the truth of it all, and I still wonder if we're all not delusional sometimes." Albert caught his breath and wiped his eyes. "Sure as he stands before you though, when your father was a little one I told him stories at his bedside and paddled his butt when he misbehaved."

Ban and Laurelie both gasped in horror.

"What?”

"You said butt!”

"Now the angry lady will only feed you stale bread!”

When the first of the sunlight started coming over the hills Lily anchored another portal, allowing workers to ferry through the rest of the supplies for their stay: bundles of heavy canvas for their tents and many dozens of crates of food and drink. With Albert's permission Lily's retinue began to set up their temporary home. By mid-morning there was a small circus's worth of brightly dyed tents erected on an empty plot near the house. Lily and John would occupy one large tent with their children, and their followers would occupy four even larger tents, with one empty tent set up as a place to gather and eat.

Andrea had rejoined them, having shed her soiled nightgown for a simple dress.

Contrary to her threats, she came bearing treats. The children, still not having come to terms with the strange concept of human family, were greatly swayed by the handful of taffies that Andrea offered them each. Ban proceeded to try and eat them all at once, and spent the next half hour chewing.

By noon, the group of them had gathered under the shade of the garden to share lunch and try to catch up on missed years. Horace, Albert's newly hired steward, had brought forth a whole cask of wine, and a large pitcher of tea sweetened with crushed blueberries for the children.

"So, once all the damage from your escape was paid off, we still had a pouch of pearls and three bolts of silk. Now, the merchants from Port Juoan hadn't ever seen pearls have that size. They were selling for more than the local sapphires. But the silk, that was the real prize. *Nobody* had seen silk of that quality; it was selling for an ounce of gold a yard at the end.” Albert paused to let Laurelie climb up to sit on his lap. He rested one hand of the ruby striped scales of her neck while he talked.

"It was enough to triple our gross that year. With the extra we chartered a schooner and a captain to make contact with your merchants.” He nodded to Lily. "They were generous enough to sell us our first load on credit. Since then, we've made profit every year.”

"We own three ships now; used to be four. One sunk by pirates” Victoria said offhandedly. "Your brother is down in Juoan now negotiating the

purchase of a replacement.”

"Gregory is finally a part of the family business? I figured he would still be trying to sell his paintings. Will he be back before I leave?” John asked, fending off Ban's attempts to scramble up his shoulder.

Johnathan's mother frowned for just a moment before forcing a smile back to her face, "No I'm afraid not dear. He'll likely be gone your entire stay.”

Her brief lapse told John what her words didn't. "He doesn't want to see me does he?” He asked quietly.

Victoria sighed, "I'm sorry dear, he left almost as soon as we told him you were coming. He has not quite accepted your . . . changes.”

As much as it saddened John, he couldn't feel any offense. He was already overwhelmed by how welcoming the rest of his family had been. "I can't say I blame him;” John poured the rest of his bowl of wine down his throat. "I'm honestly surprised that you lot have reacted as well as you have.”

Albert snorted. "It took a lot of years of preparing ourselves son, I'll admit that. For the first year, I wasn't ready to believe any of this.” The older man sighed and looked wistfully as his grand-daughter curled up on his lap, her tail and wings twitching in idle day-dreams. "John, this has been hard for all of us to come to terms with. Greg will come around.”

Somber quiet settled over the group, but before it could become too oppressive Andrea got to her feet and looked around. "So, who wants to help me get lunch ready?”

"Me!” Ban shouted nearly instantaneously.

"Me too!” Laurelie was suddenly squirming her way off of Albert's lap and dancing circles around Andrea.

"Well, I suppose you two have behaved all right. Let's see if we can find you something to eat besides bread scraps.” The three of them vanished into the house with a clamor of childish shouting.

"Albert, if I may ask, what were the Lancers doing out here if you'd already informed the watch?” Lily inquired softly after Andrea and the children were out of earshot.

Albert sighed and drained his glass of wine. "The whole mess is just a conflict of trade. There was only one man who imported textiles around here before we started dealing with your people. *Lord* Hershel,” Albert sneered the title, "brought in quality cottons and mohair overland from the east. Once we started importing silk his sales went down. Hershel happens to be the current military chancellor so whenever he gets the chance he'll send the Lancers or

the army or whoever he can to harass us.

John's temper flared and before he knew it his lips had peeled back to bare his teeth. Albert put up a hasty hand, staying any objection John could make. "Don't concern yourself with it John. I've already been before the Lords' council, and he's been officially admonished for misappropriation. He's still chancellor of course, but things have gotten better."

He nodded to Lily, "To be honest My Lady, I'm sure the Lancers were intended for you. If I know anything about that dog I'd wager that he wanted his men to pour some honey on you and try and convince you to send some of that silk his way. He probably had that captain and his men up all night waiting for you to arrive."

"It did seem too quick go be a reactionary force."

Albert nodded, "Honestly Ma'am, I hate to say it, but you're liable to have a lot of snakes swimming ashore in your land now. South Meridia didn't hold much interest to us here before, but now that there's gold to be had people are changing their tune."

"South Meridia?"

"Falkura, love. That's what they call your continent here. South Meridia, because it's the southern half of the only continent in the world to have land on both sides of the meridian." John clarified.

"Ah."

"Anyhow," Albert continued on after trying to sip from his empty glass, "everyone considered it too far away, and too wild. All the sailors spoke of was kingdoms of savage men with skin like dark bronze, and countries ruled by monsters. No offense."

Victoria poured another glass of wine for Albert and emptied the rest of the carafe into the tall bowls that John and Lily drank from. "I have some eyes and ears in the palace My Lady-"

"Please, Victoria, Albert, I appreciate your respect for my position, but if I have to hear ma'am or my lady or any of that rubbish again from anyone here, I'm going to lose my mind."

Victoria smiled. "Of course, Lily. As I was saying, I have hired some help in Pastock Palace, and they tell me some nasty rumors are coming from the Lords' Council." John's mother took her seat again. "First, there was a session to decide how difficult it would be to seize territory for themselves on South Meridia, or Falkura. Once the logistics were worked out, it was decided that the endeavor would be too costly."

John could only imagine. Landing soldiers to take territory in some primitive land was one thing, and had been done. Assaulting a full-fledged nation on an entirely different continent was madness. They'd lose half the men at sea, and half again to desertion once they'd landed.

"Word now is that they plot to send men and gold to foment a rebellion with the locals so that they have a friendly faction over there."

"That might be more difficult than they imagine." Lily said with a harsh smile. "I am sure it is inconceivable in their minds to leave a nation in charge of a dragon, but my people seem quite content with it. After all, they make the decision that I remain as queen every time they re-elect me."

"Elect?" Albert and Victoria asked unanimously, confounded.

"Of course. We hold a vote at the end of every decade. Each adult casts a single vote, which are tallied at the local level. It takes about a year for the final count to come in, but for the last seven decades, I have gladly held my office."

Albert and Victoria glanced to John for some sort of confirmation. "It's the truth. I witnessed one of the elections just last year. Obviously there were a number of personalities that tried to run against Lily, but I believe she ended up winning some eighty percent of the votes counted."

While Albert and Victoria digested this information Andrea emerged from the kitchen with the children hot on her heels. By the smears of butter and blueberry jam each of them wore on their snouts, the two of them had already had a go at the food. Two maids followed after carrying lunch, but even as they began to lay it out one of Lily's guards sprinted up

"My Lady," he bowed quickly, "a man has rung at the gate, asking to see you."

"See me? Albert, shall I invite him in?"

"If you wish My-eh, Lily." He caught himself mid-sentence.

"Very well, please bring him in, Sari." The guard bowed again and sprinted away.

Maribel approached shortly with a very nervous looking gentleman in tow. The man was dressed in ornamental armor, with a short sword belted to his side and a tabard across his chest emblazoned with a very elaborate crest.

"This fellow wanted to speak to you specifically My Lady," Maribel halted the man several yards away from the group

"One of Hershel's men." Albert grunted, gesturing with a strip of bacon at the tabard's crest.

"*Lord* Hershel," The newcomer corrected, "I am Sir Leroy Falthwain, knight of the Falthwain house, and Lord Hershel Falthwain's seneschal. He tasked me with sending this invitation to her highness, the Queen Lily." He presented a precisely folded square of parchment with ribbons hanging from the wax seal in the center.

"Queen Lililethan," Lily corrected him in turn. "I do not know this Hershel, and will not have him giving me nicknames."

The man blanched, "Of course My Lady. He wouldn't presume! We were misinformed; we will not make the mistake again."

Before Maribel could take the letter from him the knight snatched it back. "This is to be passed into Royal hands only."

"Very well." Lily motioned him forward, took the letter from him, and then handed it Mirabel once he had stepped away again. "Please read that aloud for us Maribel."

The messenger stiffened, but could say nothing as Mirabel carelessly flicked away the pressed wax seal and ribbon and began to read aloud.

"To Your Highness, Lady Lily. Please allow me to introduce myself, I am Hershel, Lord of the Falthwain House, Chancellor of the Armies and Navies of Pastock, Commander of the Royal Lancers, Ruler of the Frostmire- this goes on for some time, shall I skip it?"

"Please."

"Allow me to extend an invitation, from one member of royal blood to another, to a banquet to be held in Pastock Palace in honor of your first visit to our country, to be held at sunset one week from today." Maribel scanned the remainder of the letter, mumbling to herself, and finally folded the letter. "Nothing else of import follows My Lady."

"I shall have to consider the invitation. I will send word by tonight whether my husband and I will be coming."

"Apologies My Lady, the invitation is for those of royal blood only."

The words hadn't quite died in the air before Lily surged to her feet. In an instant her bared teeth were inches from the knight's face. His hand fell on his sword, but he managed enough restraint not to draw it. John sucked in a breath and pulled Ban and Laurelie to his chest.

"You would do well to not so boldly insult my family. My husband is the Royal Consort, and father to my children. Would you so calmly say that my children are not royalty as well?"

"N-n-no My Lady! Of course not!"

"My husband and my adviser Maribel will both be accompanying me, or I shall remain here among those who do not casually cast scorn upon my loved ones. Make that clear to your Lord Hershel, and get out of my sight."

The man stepped back as if to bow, but Lily followed him pace for pace until he was forced to turn and flee.

Once the man was out of sight the dragoness chuckled quietly with a bounce of her shoulders and wings and sat back down with an enormously satisfied grin.

"Happy with yourself?" John asked, rolling his eyes and releasing the children, "I think you scared my family half as much as you scared him. Not to mention Ban and Laurelie."

"I wasn't scared!"

"Me neither!"

"Sorry loves, and my apologies to you three as well." She bowed her head slightly to Albert, Andrea, and Victoria. "Occasionally it is necessary to show that I am intelligent enough to understand a slight."

Albert gave a hearty guffaw and waved his bacon wand excitedly, "Hell, I'd pay to see that again. If only it was Hershel himself. What I wouldn't give to see that slimy scoundrel wet himself."

"Albert! Control yourself in front of the children."

"Hum yes, sorry. Do you intend to go? I can tell you now it will be little more than weasel moves to curry favor and wring information from you. I wouldn't be half surprised if they didn't try and poison one of you."

"Perhaps, but if it's as you say, these men and women intend to try and usurp power in my land. I'd like to use this opportunity to get to know my enemies."

They passed the day swapping tales and watching Ban and Laurelie play. In the evening Albert liberated a dozen bottles of liquor from the cellar. Lily's hired musicians and dancers put on an impromptu show, and Albert passed the spirits around for all to share.

When the show had worn down and the bonfires began to burn low, Albert took Ban and Laurelie inside and sat down with them in front of the hearth. Much as he had with John as a child, he told them fairy tales and stories of his youth. Before long both young dragons were curled up on the rug beside him, fast asleep.

"Of course they can sleep inside John!" His mother whispered loudly, in high spirit from the imbibed spirits. "We'll put them in your bed tonight.

They're plenty small to both fit and it will be nice to have someone in the room again."

"Thanks Mom." John gave her a gentle hug good night and nodded to Albert as his father carefully lifted a sleeping Laurelie into his arms. His mother, uninhibited with Liquor, reached up and gave Lily a hug as well before quietly closing the door.

"It's been quite the day Love." John said tiredly, smiling at his wife as they made their way back to their tent.

"Yes it has been. I told you to trust me; everything turned out fine."

"We're not out of the woods yet. We still have that banquet. If anything is liable to backfire on us it's that." He spoke in good humor though.

The two of them stepped into their tent, and Lily looked around outside before tying the flaps closed and turning to her husband. She grinned and stepped alongside him, rubbing her nose against his.

"John?"

"Hmm?"

"The children are inside, safe and sound. There's no one around and we have the tent to ourselves." Her eyes were luminous emeralds in the dim interior.

"Oh?" He yawned, and then quickly snapped his mouth shut.

"Oh! I see." He shivered as she leaned in and rubbed the length of her body against his. With a rippling growl she nipped the edge of his ear, her tongue snaking out wetly to bathe the delicate skin.

"John," Her voice was husky with desire, "you have no idea how I've wanted this."

The need in her voice and the way she was practically trying to wiggle her way underneath of him had John's blood racing. He wasn't feeling tired anymore.

They spent the next few minutes touching, caressing kissing, winding each other up into a heated frenzy until Lily was pulling and yanking at his silks in desperation to expose him to her. The sudden outpouring of lust gave John pause. "Lily," he gasped out between kisses, "you're not going in estrus are you?"

She pushed against him insistently, rolling John onto his side, and then onto his back. "When is the last time we had sex John?"

He thought on it for a moment, but in the passion of the moment he couldn't recall. "Seven months back? I don't remember."

"Neither do I, and that is the problem.” She reached down and unfasted the bottom of her gown, freeing herself from the damp silk and sending a wave of her scent across the tent. John could taste it on his tongue.

"I love our children dearly John, but I did not take such a beautiful mate so that I could be constantly teased by his presence, forever unable to indulge myself.” She stepped over him and ground her hips down on his, and John moaned aloud as his erection swelled within him.

"I took a mate so that I could be satisfied. I took a mate, so that when the urge struck, I could hold him down and fuck him.” She snarled the last few words and settled her paws atop his chest, her greater weight forcing him down into the cushions. John's shaft emerged at last, trapped in the silk gown he wore, sandwiched between their bodies.

"You're going to have a tough time with I'm still wearing this.” John chuckled.

Lily growled playfully and stepped off him to bend over and release him from his cloth prison, but the moment he was free of her weight John sprung up He bowled her over with a victorious grin. She struggled, but John calmed her with a roll of his hips, grating his tip against her puffy, needy vent. Though her gown was off, his was not, and he could only wedge the first inch into her, spreading her slick arousal across the taut silk.

Lily's eyelids fluttered shut and a blissful moan escaped her. "I know what you want Lily, but let me do it my way. You know I can make it worth it.”

She panted up in his face and nodded, kissing him once deeply before placing a hand on the top of his head and pushing him down her body.

He gave little kisses to the silk covered scales as he moved down before finally stopping at her smoldering entrance. The normally slim crease of her sex was inflamed and wet. John blew a gust of heated air over her and stretched his tongue out to lap up her spilled juices.

"Don't tease, not today. I need this, before something interrupts us.” The urgency in her voice made John acquiesce, and he slowly wedged the tip of his tongue into her.

Their magic gave the two dragons the ability to permanently alter themselves and neither dragon could resist doing so for the sake of sexual pleasure. John's tongue was much thicker and longer, so as he sank the slick organ into her, its girth stretched her sex into a tight ring, penetrating her in earnest. "Yesssss!” She hissed out, her thighs clenching around his neck. John swirled the tip of his tongue around those first few sensitive inches

before plunging deeper. Snakelike, he burrowed down until he came to the sensitive ridge of bumpy flesh buried in the flesh of her body.

He pressed up against it with a long hard lick and drew a shuttering howl from her. He pulled his tongue out for a moment, "Quiet love, or we *will* be interrupted."

Lily nodded, biting her lip and waving for him to continue. Once more John tasted her depths. The faint flavor of her excitement bathed his senses, as he bathed her insides. The second time he probed that sensitive spot she managed to choke off her moans so that it came out as a strangled whine. John couldn't get enough. Over and over again he licked and suckled at that spot until her arousal was running freely and she was writhing on the cushioned floor and her tail coiling up around his chest. Her juices clung to his tongue smeared over his snout and filled his nose so that his body was burning with lust. Constant drool of his own pre-cum caused a growing stain on the silk covering him, and he ravished her with growing ferocity.

A most wicked idea entered John's mind. He pried her tail away from him and withdrew his tongue long enough to suckle and slather the tip of her tail until it was dripping wet. Once he was satisfied it was messy enough he placed the tip of it at the tight pucker of her backside. Again he started feeding his tongue into her, now forcing her own tail into her rump at the same time. Lily went into a fit, thrashing on the floor on a cacophony of moans and gasps. Whether intentionally or due to her spasms Lily plunged her tail deeper than he intended, pulling it out of his grip so that the first full foot of it surged down into her body.

John could feel her tail pushing up against the bottom of her sex, making it even tighter against his tongue. Not to be outdone, he forced inch after thick inch into her, making sure that every bit of it scraped slowly past that ridge of nerves as he filled her as much as she could bear.

"Yes yes yes!" She whined, pushing a truly punishing amount of her tail forward. With the slick walls of her canal twitching around his tongue at their absolute limits, John let the muscular organ writhe around inside of her.

It was too much for the needy dragoness. She stopped making any noise at all. Her breath seized in her chest as her body went into the first violent spasms of a long sought after orgasm. John's face was awash in a flood as she clamped down on his tongue. Her legs kicked weakly in the air to either side of his head as though trying to fight off the waves of pleasure. John ground his snout down firmly against her lips as she shuddered and shivered and

bucked her hips up against his face.

"Oh!" Lily breathed once her body allowed her again. Her chest heaved against the silks and her wings flopped weakly in an attempt to cool herself. With a noisy slurp John pulled his tongue from her grasping insides and licked his lips clean.

"Good?"

"Mmm." She agreed.

"Good, that means we can take this slower." John stepped back just long enough to free his swollen length from its confinement before easing back over her "I want to feel you, not this dress." He said, carefully unfastening the straps and buttons of her clothing.

Lily smiled languidly and reached up to return the favor. It had been so long since John had undressed anyone, he'd almost forgotten the thrill of slowly revealing a lover. As the silk wrapping fell away from her neck John bathed her scales in kisses and nibbles, starting from her jawline down to her chest, and up one forelimb to the wrist and back across to the other. Her feet kicked away the last of the green silk from his sides, leaving them both exposed to the growing chill of the night.

John lowered himself to rest his chest lightly against Lily's, feeling her heart pound against his and the warmth of her body blending with his. With his legs splayed out to either side of her tail John crouched and probed. His crown slid wetly along the scales of her tail where it was still stuffed into her bottom. For a moment he teased that stretched opening, making his dragoness squirm, before he moved higher. He left a trail of glistening wetness until he came to rest at the messy opening of her sex. Slowly, so very slowly, he eased himself forward and in. Lily's mouth fell open in a deep breath as her overly-sensitive flesh was forced to part for the folded and textured tip of his cock.

Like his tongue, John had made some slight changes to his manhood. It was a little longer, a little wider, and covered in smooth, textured waves. With the added girth of her tail lifting the floor of her passage she was squeezed so tight around him that each of those wavy ridges tugged and dragged on her lips as he sank in slowly. John grunted as her furiously hot flesh grasped and pulled on him, her muscles flexing around him in a lovely dance. He eased his inches into her until the pebbly skin of his tip touched that most sensitive spot. He stopped, changed the angle of his entry, and thrust lightly up against it.

"Ohhh John, easy. Easy please.” She pleaded, wide eyed and gasping. Her hands clutched at his neck and her feet kicked involuntarily into the air.

"Sorry love.” He comforted her, licking and rubbing at her throat. He didn't repeat the motion. Instead he gently squeezed past and onward. Even so, every time the texture of his shaft ran over that spot, she clenched up anew. It took a short eternity for him to come to rest inside of her, nearly fully buried. He stopped and rested his hips atop hers. Lily closed her eyes and shifted to make herself comfortable under his weight as her body adjusted to the penetration.

Her breathing slowed, and on the outside she looked calm, but John was being constantly teased by the flexing pulsing grip of her around his manhood and the twitching of her tail in her rump. "All right, go ahead.” She finally gave her assent.

With a thankful groan John pulled out; the rear facing tines of flesh on his glans dragged along her walls. Lily latched her teeth firmly onto his shoulder to muffle her cries as her fingers curled into fists atop his neck, pulling him tightly against her.

John too was having a hard time containing himself. The extra girth of her tail was making a normally tight fit nearly unbearably so. He couldn't imagine what she felt, so overly stuffed and sensitive from her climax. But she didn't withdraw her tail, nor did she stop him. In fact, as he started a slow stroke back inwards, she hooked her ankles over his tail, her toes curling as she pulled him back in faster with her legs. As John settled into his motions, Lily picked up a shaky pace of her own, pulling her tail out as he lifted his hips, and shoving it back in as he re-entered.

John panted ad closed his eyes, trying to keep his breathing and body under control. He knew that once he went over the edge, the fun was done for the night. Despite this knowledge, it was getting near impossible not to focus on the veridian scaled beauty clinging to him, grinding against him. The way her tongue flicked against his shoulder stifled her cries of pleasure against his scales, the way her sex was squeezing his and her tail squirming against his shaft through the thin barrier of flesh. Each time he pulled out he was slamming down harder, bottoming out inside of her. The tightening in his gut gave signal that it wouldn't be long.

Soon his carefully controlled rhythm deteriorated until he was rutting her like a feral creature, plunging in and out of her as fast as his hips would move. Somehow, Lily beat him to another peak. With a muffled squeal of

delight, her claws dug into the back of his neck and she hammered her hips up against his thrusts. Gasping in an attempt to delay his climax, John ground against her back wall and the tiny opening there. Like him had changed her body to play to her own fetishes. Thanks to those changes, the opening to her womb slowly gave way under his assault, allowing the tip of his organ entry.

Buried in her flesh as absolutely deep as he could get, John finally let the surge of his climax take over. The folded crown of his cock sprung out into a flared plug, sealing him into her womb as the first surge of months of pent up cum flooded into her. John rolled onto his side, clutching Lily close against him as he settled in to ride it out. Like an open tap, he continued to pump inside a vast store of his seed, reserves made possible by long abstinence and intentional alteration.

Prior to meeting Lily, John's concept of sex was markedly conservative, but during their first lusty months as a couple she had opened up a world of indulgences and kinks that he would have never considered. While a shorter and less messy climax would have been more convenient, Lily took great satisfaction in the opposite. She had taken great joy in driving him to ever greater duration and output, so that each time he came inside of her it was a truly fulfilling experience. John, despite his initial reservations, had so far found no reason to complain.

Even as Lily was coming down from her second orgasm, John was just getting started. "Mmm, thank you love.” She cooed, kissing the top of his head. John could only gasp and tremble against her as he continued to leak a steady stream into her womb. She held him close and rubbed herself against him as she luxuriated in the steadily building pool of heat in her belly before she started thrusting her tail again.

John groaned in a tortured delight as her insides rippled and sucked. It was going to be a long night.

Compliments of the Chef

John's early morning dreams were lascivious and lewd. Slippery wet sensations filled his mind, so tangible they felt real. Lily was atop him writhing and bucking, her loins on his the only sound in the room. Muffled slurping sounds tugged at his mind and pulled him slowly awake, even as the sensations seemed to grow stronger. Yanked through that strange and ephemeral barrier between dream and reality, John found himself blinking in the dim interior of their tent. Before his mind had even started to come to terms with the denial of his dream, a soft, sweltering grip around his maleness drew a ragged moan from his throat.

He was on his back staring at the fading moonlight illuminating the canvas walls while the sound of messy slurping and smacking rang faintly in the night. Lily was sprawled out on her side with her back to him and her chest draped over his lower stomach. Her hands rested on his thighs, spreading his legs apart for access. He watched her neck and head bob and twist as she nursed on him. He couldn't tell how long the dragoness had been suckling on him, but it had to have been a while given how close to orgasm he felt.

He was debating speaking when she slowly pushed her face down into his groin. His tip slid wetly across her tongue, deeper into her muzzle, until the clenching muscles of her throat slowly enveloped his crown. Swallowing around his girth until her lips kissed his scales; she twisted her tongue around his spire until it slid past her lips and into the tight enclosure of his vent.

"Lily!” John gasped aloud, unable to hold his quiet any longer. Her shoulders shook in laughter, the sound coming out wet and muffled around his throbbing shaft. Unlike him, she had not altered her tongue; the slim and serpentine organ probed easily into his body. It delivered pinpoints of pleasure as she began to gulp around his cock, the powerful suction and rippling of her muscles milking him mercilessly.

"Uh! Lily,” He panted, his tail slapping the cushions in warning, "I'm going to cum, you'll be stuck again!”

She pulled her tongue back into her mouth and lifted her just enough to make him breath in relief, but it proved to be short lived. Just as his body was drawing back from the edge, the tip of her tongue flicked over opening of his urethra once before easing in. Silky smooth and sinuous, it slid effortlessly down the length of John's shaft so that it bulged slightly from the inside.

Again she pushed her face into his lap and so that she was swallowing around him. Tasting him inside and out, her tongue tickled deeper and deeper inside of him while the grip of her throat pulled and pulsed around his glans.

John's climax hit like a tidal wave. His folded flare opened up and engorged somewhere behind Lily's jaw, locking them together with her head in his crotch. Hot waves of cum churned up his length, slowed by Lily's tongue so that it oozed in steady stream directly into her throat. She drank eagerly from him, and John could only quiver and watch with wide eyes as her neck rippled again and again with loads of his swallowed seed. The sight only drove him on higher. When his output had eased off to a meager trickle she gave an experimental tug. Sure enough, the flare of his tip was wedged well into her neck, the outline of it vaguely visible bulging in her throat.

"Told you." John slurred in satisfaction as his climactic spasms weakened. Lily gave a strained purr of contentment. The waves of orgasm didn't disguise her weaving a spell. A tingle of cold pressure gripped John in his core, making his stomach clench in an unexpected way. Much to his surprise, even as Lily continued to tease him with her mouth, his flared tip collapsed back down. She was able to free herself, pulling her tongue out of his shaft with a nearly comical slurp.

"I didn't know you could do that." John said, mystified.

Lily turned her head to face him, "A master never stops learning."

The gravitas of her statement was completely lost on John though, as the state of her face sent him into barely restrained laughter. Small streamers of thick white cream clung to the bottom of her jaw and dribbled from her nostrils. Somehow a spatter of it had ended up along the bridge of her snout between her eyes.

"Oh heavens Lily, your face!"

She rolled her eyes, "You can sit there and laugh, or you can help clean me up so we can move on to the next part.

"You're not satiated yet?" He already knew the answer. Lily had a libido unlike anything John had seen or heard of. The first year of their marriage had been filled with acts so wanton and frequent they would have put a blush on the most seasoned of prostitutes

She snorted derisively. "Satisfied? If we could do this every night for a week I would barely be scratching the surface. No I'm not satisfied, and if everything worked as intended, neither are you." She placed one fingertip atop his still-rigid erection while she smiled at him, inordinately smug

considering the streamers of semen spattering her face.

John growled as he realized his body was ready and roaring to go again, "Oh you conniving she-devil. Haven't you drained me of my essence enough for one night? You're going to be the death of me.” John grumbled. He rolled over and leaned in to start tongue-bathing her face.

Once upon a time this act would have been unfathomable to John. Oh how his dragoness had broadened his horizons; as he cleaned the mess of his own seed from her face it hardly even registered as unusual. Lily closed her eyes and enjoyed the attention as his tongue stroked softly over her jaws. She didn't tolerate it for long though before she gently pushed him away and stood. "Good enough, who knows how long it will be before the kids come running in here.”

She did an about face and looked over her shoulder to grin at him, "Ready?”

John ambled up behind her, placing one paw upon her hips, "As ready as I'm going to get.”

Her breath escaped in an excited churr as he hopped up and slid atop her back, shoving her tail to the side. Gripping her tightly around the hips, John leaned forward to nibble and lick along her spine. Small probing thrusts of his hips soon brought his erection brushing against her swollen sex. He slid in a shallow depth and she flicked her tail across his flank in response, "Aim a bit higher John.”

John blinked in surprise, "Are you sure?”

"Of course, why do you think I got you so well lubricated?”

"Like I said: conniving.” He pulled back out and sent the pointed tip of his shaft sliding across her scales until it came to rest in the small groove of her bottom, so recently stretched by her tail. She gave a pleasant hum of consent and tried to relax under him. Despite those efforts and the thick slurry of saliva and seed coating his arousal, her rump was a very tight fit. John took an awkward, halting step forward, forcing the first inch of his tip past the tight opening into her rear. Bit by bit his loins closed with her haunches as he hobbled forward and shuffled up along her back. The crushing furnace of her insides battled against him; as John forced passage deeper into her backside the walls around him twitched and spasmed involuntarily. The friction had both dragons panting and shaking with overloaded nerves.

After a torturously long push inward he came to rest with his crotch cupped firmly over her rump, his hind legs pinned tightly to either side of

hers so that his clawed toes splayed over hers.

"Ohhh," Lily moaned, "give me a moment." Compared to the girth of the shaft now buried in her gut, the slender tip of her tail hadn't been any stretch at all. Reminded of his tail, he curled it down to the slick crease of her vent and eased it in, hoping to override whatever discomfort she felt.

"Oh yes!" She breathed gratefully as her body gripped the scales of his tail. He pressed along the top of her sex, teasing the bottom of his shaft through her taut flesh, until he pressed against her favorite spot. Lily gave a yelp and nearly collapsed under him as her whole body went weak in shock, and then locked up from stimulation. John grit his teeth as her insides tightened their embrace.

"Uh, fuck," She swore softly, "John, you'd better be fast if you're doing that."

"Don't think you have to worry." With a lewd, wet sound, he pulled out a couple inches. She rippled around him as he pulled away, his textured cock tugging her insides. Accompanying the slow push back in was another firm flick against the spot with his tail. She tightened like a velvety fist against his intrusion while she flexed her back and strangled off a scream. He alternated his movements, thrusting his tail forward when his hips pulled back so that Lily was never completely empty.

The soft waves and ridges of his shaft pushed at pulled at the flesh of her rump, and the friction of his tail against those bumps seemed to drive her into uncontrollable seizures of pleasure. The squeezing undulations of her bowels had John struggling to maintain his breathing and focus; she had to get off first.

As if answering his prayers, she entered the first throes of her peak, "John! John, John oh f-fffuck me John!" She couldn't fully restrain her scream this time as she shoved her hips back desperately against him.

Hearing his name called in such an exquisitely needy way was all the encouragement he needed. Abandoning his attempts at control the ruby dragon ground himself harshly against her backside, shoving his tail mercilessly deep and bowing it up so that it shoved against her pleasure center and ground it against the bottom of his cock. A soft murmuring rumble was all that escaped him as bliss washed his mind blank. With a shudder, he came inside of her, his flared out tip making a plug as he flooded her belly with liquid heat.

Lily purred with contentment as her climax wore down, and she wiggled

and flexed to tease him as he seeded her again. Depleted by previous activities, he was much less prodigious in his output, but his orgasm ground on anyhow, still managing to deposit a respectable bubble of warm seed in her gut. Lily stood beneath him and bore his weight, willing to let nature take its course this time while John licked desperately at her scales and rubbed himself against her.

A golden glow of sunlight beat against the canvas by the time he was able to extract himself. Lily clenched up as he pulled out so as not to spill his cum across their bedding. "We should wash up." She suggested.

John nodded tiredly as he hopped off her back, "The river is a few minutes away if we fly. I know a spot where we'll have some privacy."

"Good. If we hurry, we may be able to have a bit of fun there too!"

In the end they decided not to spend too much time at the river. They cleaned themselves far upstream of Pastock in the shelter of a narrow glen where the water wasn't running too fast. Upon their return to the estate they were greeted by an awakened camp and the smell of cooking. Lily's human guards and followers gave the dragons knowing smiles; the tent walls had not done very much to hide their activities. Someone had taken their silk wrappings away to be laundered, along with the messiest parts of their bedding.

The occupants of the house were up as well. Andrea was in a side yard feeding chickens, while Ban watched the birds, spellbound. As soon as Andrea saw them approaching her face lit up in a livid blush and she carefully kept her eyes directed away from them. "Good morning. You two were up early."

Gut twisting abashment seized John as her tone and her awkward smile made it clear that she had heard them. "Sorry." He mumbled.

"It's my fault really." Lily stated very matter-of-factly. She seemed unbothered entirely. "We don't get much time with the children to worry about. I'm afraid I was unable to contain myself after so long an abstinence. You understand."

"Of course." Andrea said simply, obviously hoping to drop the conversation. While the people of the Blazing Coast regarded sex and sexuality as a very natural topic of discussion, here it was something that was understood to happen, but collectively ignored otherwise. "Well, you two had better go get dressed. Some of Dad's customers are supposed to come by for brunch to review purchase obligations."

"Dressed?” Lily asked, nonplussed.

John wanted to crawl into a hole. No wonder Andrea refused to look at them. After arriving in their silk gowns she must have thought it was common for them to clothe themselves. "Um, Andy, we don't usually...that is clothing is restrictive in flight, and generally we don't...” He trailed off awkwardly. It had taken a good time for John to get used to the idea of constantly being stark-naked in public, and the conversation was reviving old insecurities.

"Oh! Dear, I can see how that would be something of a misunderstanding.” Lily nodded sagely, but a glimmer of mischief lurked in her smile. Immodesty and impropriety greatly amused the dragoness. "No dear, we don't generally wear much at all. By design we're streamlined for flight so there's not much for us to hide.” Her eyes twinkled, and John tried to brace himself. "Why, if you just glance at Johnathan's undercarriage, you'll see that there's nothing there at all.”

Johnathan's eyes went wide with horror, quickly amplified when Andrea did glance, and then blushed even deeper as she realized what she'd done.

"Lily!”

"Yes?”

"That's my sister!”

"Exactly. It's necessary that she become comfortable around you. There's nothing for you to hide, so she should be agreeable with you being naked by default.”

"Oh my time flies!” Andrea practically shouted in a panic. She upended the pail of chicken feed and fled towards the house. "Time to get breakfast made!” She nearly took the door off its hinges in her hurry to get inside.

John hung his head and groaned. Lily looked quite pleased with herself.

"Mom! Dad!” John temporarily shouldered the embarrassment to the side as Ban came charging through the cluster of feeding chickens. "We slept in a bed last night! Grandpa said it was yours!”

"Yes it was. Where is your sister?”

"She's lazy!” Ban said dismissively.

"Am not!” Laurelie shouted from the depths of the house.

"Grandpa said you wrecked the whole city!” Ban's childish voice cracked and squeaked under the strain of his excitement as he scaled his father's tail.

"Only a very small part of it.”

"Were you fighting?”

"No, I was running away.”

Ban continued to interrogate his father about the event, and was soon joined by his sister. Together the two of them asked ever more leading questions, until they were more or less telling John about the time he had burned down the city. It wasn't until breakfast was served that John was given any respite. Sheltered in the garden once more, his family took their meal. Andrea seemed to have recovered her composure, and Lily mercifully did not embarrass her husband in front of his parents.

Some of the food they had brought through the gate had gone into the morning's breakfast, resulting in a colorful dish of scrambled eggs with various chopped peppers and vegetables. "So, did you two make a decision on attending Hershel's party?” Albert asked as he suspiciously poked at his eggs. After a moment he took a tentative bite.

"Yes,” Lily nodded and carefully lifted a heaping spoonful to her mouth. The dragons didn't typically use silverware, so she was somewhat out of practice. "I sent two of my men into the city to say we would accept his invitation. I'll have to augur the location later.”

"Just be careful. Nice dinners aren't always as nice as they seem.”

The week passed far quicker than John would have liked. The two dragons spent the afternoon of their second day cloistered in to tent to work a divination deep into the castle, scouting the location where the banquet would be held. Lily led the far-gazing, and easily maneuvered past the clumsy wards surrounding the castle. John simply acted as anchor and helped stabilize her. He had tried to scry with her once, and the bizarre omni-perspective and whirlwind motion had left him nauseous and too disoriented to make any sense of what he was supposed to be seeing. She spent two long hours searching the castle in her mind's eye before returning, satisfied that they would be safe.

Days blurred by, spent either exploring the area with Lily and the children, or catching up on lost years with his parents and sister. Finally the day of their feast arrived. John tried not to mope as they made preparations. Leaving their children unattended had both parents concerned, so the first order of business was to set comprehensive protective spells around the estate and set the guards to their watch. The wards she set would also prevent outside scrying. Since their arrival several mages had attempted to peek into the property, which Lily had ruthlessly cut short. While the feedback of her

defenses wasn't exactly dangerous, John doubted anyone who had made the attempt would be feeling well enough to do it again anytime soon.

Albert and Victoria couldn't watch the children, as they had business outside the estate, so Johnathan asked his sister if she could keep an eye on them for the evening. After much begging and promises she finally agreed. Finally the only thing left was to get themselves ready. First up was a bath; Lily's entourage poured a steaming bath in one of the tents, and the two dragons scrubbed until John felt he would wear his scales off. Lily added a powerfully fragrant soap to the bath and the two of them lathered each other up and took a dunk.

The two dragons were just about to empty the bath water when Andrea and Maribel stumbled into the tent, each holding a squirming youngling. The two whelps were covered in a coat of flour, so that women and dragons looked as though they had been working in a bakery all day.

"No! We're ghosts! You can't put us in water or we'll die!" Laurelie squealed as though she was actually afraid for her life.

"Sorry John, we were playing hide and seek and they got into the larder."

John nodded in sympathy and hurried to clear a space in the tub. "Sorry, thanks again for agreeing to watch them tonight."

Andrea nodded, already looking frazzled.

"Ban, I swear if you bite me again I'll roll you in flour again and fry you in hot oil!" Maribel snapped.

"Banzhrakin! Did you bite Maribel?"

Both children immediately fell still and silent as Lily's outraged voice cracked in the air.

Ban looked up at his mother, his jaw trembling as he realized the trouble he was in. "Yes." He admitted in a whisper. Experience had taught him that lying to his parents would only make things worse.

"You apologize to her, and then you get in the tub." Lily commanded. "You too Laurelie."

"Sorry for biting, Maribel." Ban mumbled. Lily's stern rebuke had blown the fight right out of the children; they shuffled dejectedly over to the tub.

"We've told you about hurting people, but since you're having a hard time listening, you can spend the rest of the day alone in the room. If Maribel or your Aunt is feeling generous, they can bring you dinner later."

Ban flinched at his sentence and stared at the water.

Lily looked over at John for backup. "Ban," He said, stepping up to the

side of the tub. "Look at me Ban.” The young dragon looked at his father, his eyes shimmering with tears.

"Ban, has Maribel ever hurt you? Has she ever bit you or hit you?”

"No,” he sniffled in response.

"So why would you bite her? She protects you and your sister, and your mother and I as well. She plays with you, and helps feed you and teach you. She's a part of the family, so why would you hurt her?”

"She tells me what to do, and I don't like it.”

John sighed, "Banzhrakin, listen to me: everyone gets told what to do sometimes. Someday you're going to grow up and be on your own. Adults telling you what to do now is one way to teach you how to survive on your own later. If we never told you when to stop playing and come eat, you'd miss dinner and be hungry all night. If we never told you to take a bath, you'd be covered in dirt and no one would want to be around you because you smell so bad. Do you understand?”

"Yes.”

"Good. When you and your sister are done with your bath, do what your mother said and go to the room. When we get back tonight, if you've been good, we'll see if you can come out and your grandpa can tell you stories again.”

"Okay.”

John leaned in and nuzzled Ban on the top of the head; to his relief his son stretch up into the touch. Lily gratefully did the same, licking the young dragon's cheek fondly, pulling Laurelie close to that she could share her attention with both children. "I'm sorry to have yelled at you Ban; I love you both, and I'll see you both in a little bit. Behave for your Aunt, she'll be in charge while we're gone.”

Maribel stepped outside with the two of them. "I'm going to get ready and ride into town. I'll meet you at the palace.” She bowed and turned towards the house.

"John.” Lily turned to him gratefully, "Have I told you how happy I am that you're my husband?”

"Yes, but I could always stand to hear it more.”

"I can't imagine raising children without you.”

"Well, I intend to make sure you never have to.”

Leaning on each other, the two returned to their tent to finish making ready. Lily was determined to make an impression, and had pulled out all the

stops. A dozen attendants awaited them in the tent, each holding a soft cotton cloth and a jar of citrus-perfumed oil. Before John could protest he was swarmed with a half dozen men and women that began polishing his hide vigorously. Soon the whole tent took on the aroma of lemon blossoms; wherever they polished, they left his scales gleaming even in the dim light of the tent. He couldn't complain about the effect on Lily; she was a creature of living jade.

It was a strange experience having a dozen hands rubbing and groping all over his body, and John couldn't deny being more than a little uncomfortable as a man and woman ducked beneath him to do his underside, but it made the task go very quickly. Soon the same attendants were dressing them in their silk gowns. Lily had insisted on adding ornamentation to their original outfits. Each of them wore golden torques and silver bangles along their forelegs. Delicate golden filigree hung from the loops Lily wore in her ears, and she had John wrap small golden anklets above her feet. She gave John hammered gold sheaths that slipped over his horns, and a rich purple mantle that draped down his back and shoulders. Perhaps most important to John, Lily wore a locket that he had given her during their wedding.

It was very plain compared to the rest of her jewelry: a simple shield shaped pendant hanging from a delicately braided silver chain, but inside was an inscription from him:

Unbound, I fly free on wings You gave me,
But my skies are desolate without Your love
With Loyalty and Devotion, I return
To bind myself to You, ever after,
Johnathan.

She did not commonly wear it, as she feared to lose it if the fragile chain should ever break in flight. Most days is sat carefully displayed near the entrance to their home. John hadn't known she'd brought it with them, but was immediately glad to see it resting against her chest. He lifted one hand and placed it over the pendant, feeling her heart beat around it. "I didn't know you brought this."

She smiled and leaned in against him with her ear to his throat. "That's because you're my lovely, foolish husband. If I was only allowed to ever own one thing for all the rest of my days it would be this. I would never leave it behind." The humans quietly ducked out of the room into the rapidly setting sun and left the dragons to their moment.

After many long minutes of holding each other close, Lily spoke. "John, I know we don't have time right now, but tonight when we get back there is something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Of course Lily."

"We do need to leave though, or we're going to be late."

Reluctantly John nodded and pulled back. Looking over Lily again he couldn't deny that she looked like royalty now. Every inch of her was glittered and shone even in the slightest light, and her jewelry and dress accented her form and movements. Together they moved a courteous distance from the humans in the camp before springing into the air in a great buffeting gale of wing-beats. Arrangements had been made to fly directly to the Palace to save them walking miles through the maze of streets in Pastock. Ordinarily the thrill of flying had John's undivided attention, but this evening he found the miles passing below him unnoticed as his focus was on his wife.

Shimmering gold and emerald light from the setting sun reflected in her scales so that she looked radiant in the growing dusk, almost divine. The wind blew her jewelry like chimes, so that each sinuous roll of her body was accompanied by a chorus of tiny bells. Lily's attention seemed no less devoted to him. Her eyes met his gaze and raked his body alternately. The want and emotion in her eyes made it very difficult for John to finally tip his wings and descend to the palace grounds; he very much wanted to take her somewhere private and show her how beautiful she was in intimate detail. Instead the two dragons spiraled down towards the grand courtyard of the palace where their escort of dismounted lancers waited in a formation of fifty or so.

Before the two of them had touched down their officer called a salute. In unison the entire formation drew swords and brought them up vertically so that they staring past the hilts. When the officer turned to bow John was surprised to see it was the knight that had brought their invitation.

"Queen Lililethan, it would be my honor if you would allow my company to be your honor guard for the evening."

"Of course Sir Leroy, I will happily accept." Lily said neutrally, but politely.

The knight rose from his bow and turned back to the formation, his face blank. "Order! Arms!"

In another smooth motion the soldiers snapped their blades back to their sides, and then sheathed them. With a couple more shouted commands the

troop of soldiers arranged themselves into two even columns to either side of Lily and Johnathan. "My lady. Sir.” He nodded to John, "If you'll follow me.”

Leroy led the way forward and his troops automatically fell into step with him. Flanked by soldiers on either side and assaulted by the metronome cadence of their march, John felt quite uneasy. He had never cared for fighting, nor the military in general. The nearly mindless nature of their movements and actions seemed too much to him like brainwashing. He tried to force aside his distaste as they progressed deeper into the Palace grounds. Servants and nobles alike stopped and stared in awe at the dragons and their royal escort. By the elaborate dresses and suits, some of the gawkers were surely other guests for the banquet. Finally Sir Leroy called a halt outside the large double doors of the banquet hall. A clamor of voices and music filtered through the heavy wood of the doors. Aromas hung heavy in the air: a mix of cooking meats, perfume, and wine. John twitched as he felt the itch of magic just beyond the portal.

Leroy turned to face them with another clipped bow, "My Lady, please allow me to welcome you to Pastock Palace.” Two soldiers swung open the doors.

It had been a long time since John had been in the palace and he had forgotten the grandeur. The massive space inside the great hall was so large that Lily and John could have comfortably occupied it at their natural size. Currently it was filled with guests by the dozens. Long tables were arranged in two parallel rows and they were filled to capacity. Those without a place to sit stood at the sides or danced in the middle. A troupe of musicians played a slow tune that carried surprisingly well. The far end of the room was dominated by a raised platform with only a single table occupied by the Lord's Council. Glistening threads of magic hung all through the room like a diaphanous skein. The overwhelming tangle of minor spells made it impossible to dictate what was influencing what. The tangible threads of individual spells distorted and warped around the two dragons like oil over water.

It took a moment for the crowded room to notice their arrival, but slowly the noise died down. At the far end of the room John spotted Maribel, approaching through the crowd. Before she could get to them Sir Leroy stepped in behind them and cleared his throat. "On behalf of the Lord Hershel, I present Queen Lililethan, ruler of the Blazing Coast, eldest scion of the royal house Sanjeia, and her Royal Consort, Johnathan Wright-Sanjeia.”

Upon hearing the string of titles, all those present and seated stood politely in decorum.

Johnathan blinked in surprise; he had not heard Lililethan's family name since their wedding ceremony. Lily seemed unperturbed though. She bowed her head very slightly, and John belatedly followed suit.

"It seems they are thorough in their research." Lily whispered in an aside to John.

"Queen Lililethan," A man seated far right of the head table spoke up. His stern face barely moved as he spoke. "I am Lord Hershel Falthwain. As my guests, would you and your husband give me the pleasure of your company?"

"Of course." Guests parted for them as Lily and John moved down the length of the room. They were met halfway by Maribel, who took up a position on Lily's other side. Slowly, the conversation in the room regained momentum, though much of it now took place in whispers and mumbles. John could only guess that much of it was regarding them. At the head table Lily took a seat immediately to Hershel's left. There was a broad open space with a cushion conveniently placed for her to seat herself on. Once she had settled in John sat between her and the man to his left on another flat cushion. Only after both of his guests were seated did Hershel sit back down.

Nine men and three women occupied the head table: the members of the Lord's Council. Each of them was the chancellor of some function of the national government, be it the military, agriculture, economy, or something else. Once upon a time John would have been able to name all the members, but since his departure about half the faces had changed. Power here was a fickle thing that was fought over fiercely. Lord Hershel himself was a new face; a surprisingly young for the head of such a powerful household. He was younger than Albert. In fact he didn't look many years older than John himself. Still, the held an undeniable poise and confidence. His stern face and expression was accented by a certain gauntness of the cheeks and a startling widow's peak.

"Queen Lililethan, I understand that my cousin gave insult in delivering my invitation. I apologize for that; it was my orders he was following and I neglected to consider cultural differences. I hope you do not hold any ill will towards him." Hershel said, inclining his head slightly in apology.

Lily contemplated his words for a moment before smiling slightly. "I do not. I am pleased with your honesty; it shows some character to assume the responsibility." John was torn. It was admirable, he supposed, to take the

blame for his family. It also seemed highly out of character for any of the nobility to take such a risk. It felt like a trick.

Hershel gestured over a server, "We've obviously never entertained dragons before. We were unsure of your preferences but I have made the kitchen available. Just ask and our staff will work to deliver."

Lily and John both requested roasted beef. As the first server departed to the kitchens another arrived with two broad crystal goblets, a cross between a bowl and a glass. "I had one of my artisans make these, he assured me they would be suitable for you."

"Strange. They look almost exactly like the types of glasses we had commissioned at home." John mused suspiciously.

Lily smiled and leaned in to John so that her breath tickled his ear and spoke in the draconic language. "I think it is safe to assume that the gathered Lords have at least a few people among our population. We've been doing trade with them for nearly a decade John."

He grunted, still unhappy.

"So, Queen Lililethan, how have you been enjoying our country?"

"I have enjoyed it immensely. You have lovely architecture in your cities. In fact, Johnathan and I overflew the Frostmire a couple days back. I have to compliment your craftsman. They've managed to create a wonderful blend of practicality and beauty in the homes there."

"Really?" Hershel seemed honestly surprised, "That is some hundred miles north of here."

Lily nodded, "Yes, and about four-thousand feet higher in elevation. The place has a very stark beauty to it; it must be harsh living there."

Hershel shrugged slightly, his face a mask again. "It's not so bad now that we've good roads there. So long as we keep them clear of snow we can bring in food and lumber if the winter goes too deep."

The conversation drifted on to the differences between their countries and cultures. Much to John's surprise Hershel never once tried to bring up the topic of their trade agreements. These evasions seemed to surprise and annoy the others at the table as well. Eventually a much older man seated two places to John's left could take no more. As the conversation paused for the arrival of Lily and John's meal, he leaned forward and spoke loudly.

"My apologies on interrupting My Lady, but let's not pretend we invited you here to simply make small talk. There are important matters to discuss between our two nations, matters that have gone unattended for too long

now!” A small chorus of supportive murmurs came up from the rest of the occupants, save Hershel. John could swear their host gave the tiniest smile.

Lily's eyes narrowed slightly as she turned her gaze on the man. "Unattended? I have left no matters unattended I can assure you.” With that said she turned back to her meal and her conversation with the Lord Hershel, effectively ignoring the man.

John was somewhat baffled, but he followed her lead and offered no help to the sputtering nobleman. The others seated at the table seemed absolutely shocked by the clipped exchange.

A woman seated across from them spoke up next, "Queen Lililethan, I'm not sure how state matters are conducted in your land, but ignoring such a question must obviously be seen as rude!”

"That's strange, because where I'm from, it's the epitome of boorishness not to introduce yourself to a foreign guest when they are invited to your table. Or when you address them. Or to assume that a trip taken to visit family is a state matter, just because you have business interests you wish to address.” Lily's voice grew sharper with each accusation. "Forgive me if I am not literate enough to understand your written language, but the contents of my invitation mentioned nothing regarding official functions of the state.”

After an embarrassingly long silence the first man spoke again. "You are correct My Lady, I apologize.” John didn't think he looked like he was apologizing. "I am Lord Reilly Colton, and I am sorry for intruding upon the fine reception that Lord Hershel had provided this evening, but as the Chancellor of the Office of Foreign Affairs, I must beg of you to give some time to official discussion.” Hershel looked positively smug. It was then that John realized what was going on. Hershel almost certainly wanted something from Lily, but he didn't bother approaching it so bluntly knowing that his peers would do it for him. So he managed to make the rest of the council lose face and still start the dialogue he was after.

Lily must have realized the same thing, John was sure, but for some reason she had decided to play along with Hershel and double down on shaming the other lords. The dragoness took a deep breath before nodding, "Very well Lord Colton, what matter do you wish to discuss?”

"For years now our markets have been flush with silk from your shores, but we've developed no formal trade agreements. In fact we've had no diplomatic contact at all.”

"If you wanted diplomatic contact, why haven't you responded to any of

the envoys I sent?”

"What?”

"The very first shipment I sent contained an official request for an establishment of an embassy here. For the first two years I sent an envoy every six months to deliver the same request. After five requests with no response, I stopped wasting the money.”

"I only took the office three years ago!”

"Surely you must have reviewed your predecessor's affairs before assuming responsibility of the post.”

"Of course, but there was no mention of your envoys!” John couldn't decide whether to believe the previous chancellor was incompetent and hadn't recorded the envoys, or if this one was incompetent and hadn't checked. Perhaps both.

"Then why not send one yourself? I know you have contacts in my land; I receive notice of foreigners in my territory constantly anymore. I know that you have regular trade established with countries in North Meridia, so surely we're not too far out of your way? Why not make the request yourself?”

Colton flushed and stammered, unable to think of any explanation. John could only assume Colton had some reason to withhold his own envoys, it seemed unlikely that he be *that* incapable.

Lily snorted. "Fine then. Let this be an official request.” Like magic Maribel appeared by Lily's side with a quill and paper. "I request the privilege of an embassy here in your capital. In return, when you get around to it, I will provide an Embassy in our capital of Wake.” Maribel quickly penned a more official sounding document, her quill moving and dipping in broad flourishes of practiced calligraphy, before handing it to Lily to sign. The dragoness placed her scrawl at the bottom of the letter, folded it, and handed it to Lord Colton. "Does that appease your need for state business?”

Flushed with anger and chagrin, the man nodded.

"If there's nothing else?” Nobody else at the table seemed inclined to press on.

The feast went somewhat awkwardly at that, as only a handful of the people at the table were willing to speak with the dragons. John soon wished for something more stout than Ale, as he found himself more or less ignored. While Hershel was plenty willing to be polite if John directly asked him something, it became clear that the Lord had little interest in engaging him. So the dragon found himself people-gazing, watching the dancers and the

flutists, and trying to study the sprawling mass of spellwork in the air to see if there was anything interesting. After many minutes he was able to pick out spells belonging to those at the table. The lords and ladies seated around him were aglow with illusions and alterations. All except Hershel. The youngest lord was a complete dead spot in the web.

"No, Johnathan has turned out to be quite a skilled mage. He's picking up the knack rather quickly."

His name in Lily's voice drew his focus, and he looked over with mild astonishment that the topic on his mind had come up in conversation. "Hmm?"

Lily smiled at him slightly while Hershel regarded him with cool interest. "So the transmogrification was total then if he inherited your capacity for spellcraft? From what I was told he was only modestly able beforehand." John ignored the backhanded insult.

"I can assure you, his transformation was absolute." Lily confirmed.

"You say it's not reproducible?"

"No. The spell was a fortunate happenstance. I wouldn't dare risk it on another."

Hershel studied them curiously for a moment. "I have no talent myself, but I have hired a number of mages. They've told me you two are remarkably bare of any magic this evening."

"The same could be said of yourself." John spoke; he declined to mention that he and Lily were both veritably loaded with contingent spells

Hershel smiled, but didn't respond.

"Whether we were completely bare or not, your mages would not detect anything." Others at the table slowly tuned into their conversation. Of course they would want to listen for any flaw or advantage, John mused to himself.

"What most people refer to as magic, is simply anything that bends or breaks reality. Human mages have this capability, but it is not nearly through the same mechanism or to the same extent as us. Like a man in the ocean a human may dabble at the surface, but dragons swim through it and are a part of it. Your reality may be fixed, but to us it is a malleable, mutable thing. We see and experience it far differently than you."

She looked around at the mess of spells in the room. "We can see and interact with alterations others have made," she reached out with a hand, brushing against a spell there at the table, thrumming it, and the spell shimmered and changed. One of the Lords further down the table gasped as

the illusion that colored his graying hair brown suddenly instead turned it a vibrant russet red. "Or we can end them.” With a small slash of her talons through the air, a dozen minor spells ended at once.

The display of power was felt immediately as various cosmetics around the table failed; hair grayed, faces wrinkled, people were taller or shorter than previously. Lily smiled for just a moment and then went stiff as a rock, her eyes wide and frantic. A moment later John felt what she did. A foulness unspeakable and alien seeped into his mind and made his flesh crawl in disgust. Like a putrid filth trickling through the cracks in his mind, bringing images terrible and unbidden to the surface. It took much longer for the humans at the table to pick up on the sensation, but one by one they blanched. Soon people were scrambling away from the table, shouting an alarm. Maribel scanned and drew her sword, but it was Lily that finally gave a name to the presence.

"Demon.” The dragoness snarled the word with a venom that John had never heard in her voice. Spells around them unraveled and vanished as Lily rapidly countered them. Effects all over the hall ended abruptly; the amplified music suddenly sounded muted, the cool draft in the air stopped, lighting dimmed. In a very short time the hall was in a panic.

"Stay where you are!” Hershel bellowed at the room. "Fetch Geofrey and the Magisters!” He demanded of the guards stationed near the head table.

They looked at each other for a moment in confusion before one turned and shoved his way towards the crowd to the exit. John swiveled his head, trying to find something out of the ordinary, trying to find the source of the disgust he felt. Something caught his attention. He wasn't sure whether it was a sound or a flicker of movement, or something else but he suddenly knew that the thing was on the platform with them.

John had never been a fighter. He'd never even owned a sword, let alone used one, and he had viewed violence as a clumsy tool of ignorant savages. The hatred and anger that rose in him caught him entirely off guard. Purely on instinct he bundled himself low. Like an explosion he surged towards the target of his ire. His booming roar shocked the room into silence and shook dust loose from the walls and ceiling.

"John!” Lily screamed, reaching out to pull him back too late. The blood red male crashed into something like a boulder, the impact smashed the thing clean off the platform, down onto the stone pavers of the great hall. A moment later John landed on top of it with the force of an avalanche. Flesh

and bone crushed under his hands, and wet smears of vile, black, steaming ichor erupted from seeming emptiness. A moment later the illusion shielding the creature ended.

Under John's crushing grip was a gasping grotesque beast, half the size of a man. Its naked body was covered with matted greasy fur from the waist down and oily garish pink skin from the waist up. Its face was almost human, but twisted into an absurd rictus of permanent horror. A segmented scorpion tail sprung from its buttocks, nearly severed in half by John's assault. The damage he had done to the demon was immediately apparent by the crumbled and twisted limbs and the concave bloody pit where its chest once was. One hand twitched uselessly, trying to strike with the talon-like dagger it still held.

Humans scrambled away at the violent outburst, and then backed away even further when the creature was revealed, so that John was alone with a broad circle of humans around him. Recoiling at the foul odor of the thing, the dragon inhaled deeply and prepared to turn the monstrosity to ash.

"John!" Lily was suddenly by his side, her hands on his shoulders, pulling him away. Maribel stormed up, holding a wickedly crude blade of knapped flint. Lily continued to pull him away, further and further away from the demon as Maribel knelt and mercilessly drew the flint knife over its throat. It screamed gurgling obscenities as the same rancid gore bubbled from the gash, until it thrashed once more and went still.

Lily clutched John to her, patting him down as she questioned him. It took a moment for the adrenalin fog in his brain to clear enough to understand the words she was speaking. "John! Listen to me! Did it get you anywhere? Are you wounded at all?" The dragoness turned to the gathered humans, "I need alcohol, the strongest you have, and a coarse cloth!" When nobody moved she roared, "Now!" The fury and volume distorted her voice into a hurricane of sound and force. People went running, whether in fear or to obey her instructions John couldn't tell.

"Curse you all you gobsmacked herd of idiot sheep! Get out of the way or I'll have the lot of you hung and quartered!" Hershel shoved his way through the crowd, Sir Leroy his side. The young lords face had lost its mask of composure and was red with indignant fury. "Leroy, have the lancers lock down the room! Clear this lot away from the bloody demon, get a medic for the Queens consort and where in all hells is Geofrey!"

In very short order the Lancers had cordoned off the corpse and secured all

the entrances to the hall. Maribel stood close to the dragons, sword still in hand, while Lily continued to fret over John.

"Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea what could have happened to you Johnathan?" Panic, relief and horror crossed alternated on her features. John couldn't understand what had her so upset, the demon had been dealt with easily enough, but her distress was eating at him terribly and he just wanted to end it.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry Lily! Please, calm down!" He murmured, trying to comfort his wife. He wanted to hold her, to put his arms around her, but spatters of ichor covered his hands and arms. At least it hadn't gotten on the silk.

A cadre of healers arrived, carrying a bucket that reeked of pure alcohol and a coarse wool towel. Leroy directed them towards the dragons, but Lily stopped them with a snarling hiss of warning. "Just bring the bucket and the rag and get away!"

The dragoness snatched up the supplies and soaked the towel before proceeding to carefully clean every speck she could see. She doused John with alcohol until it was burning between his scales and dripping from him.

Maribel stepped away from them to intercept Geofrey. The old man led a column of mages into the room. Somehow he looked exactly as John remembered him.

Finally satisfied that he was cleansed, Lily pushed the bucket aside and pulled him close. "John, please never do that again."

John nodded into her neck. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"My Lady," Maribel interrupted them after a long minute. The two dragons reluctantly separated.

Maribel and Hershel stood a few paces away, Geofrey and the Magisters were roaming the room, questioning people intensely.

"Queen Lililethan, you have my sincere apologies. I did not imagine someone would attack us like this tonight. Sir," he bowed to John, "I owe you a great debt. I have never witnessed someone so selflessly risk themselves engaging a demon like that. You certainly saved lives tonight, perhaps even my own."

John felt bewildered at such a sincere gesture, but nodded his head.

"We have discussed the evening's events with Geofrey, and he is convinced your party certainly had no involvement. I'm sure that you must be eager to return to your family after what has happened. The lancers will allow

the three of you to depart while we continue the investigation.”

Lily flew close to him the entire trip home, her wingtip brushing his in flight, but she didn't speak. Laurelie and Ban were already asleep by the time they returned. The two children were in the tent curled up together. Lily stood over them for a long time before she finally lay down silently next to them. John settled down opposite her, forming a circle with their children in the middle. Lily didn't sleep though; she gazed at him blankly, her face pained and her thoughts obviously somewhere else.

John couldn't take it anymore, "Lily, please, talk to me.”

She focused on him and drew a shuddering breath as tears suddenly spilled from her eyes. "Johnathan, I hunted demons for too many years. I know what they do to those they capture; it's worse than death, worse than you can imagine. You can't risk yourself like that. You can't, not ever.”

Johnathan moved in closer, catching her face in his hands and pulling her close to nuzzle her, "Shh, it's not like that. It was probably someone foolish like I was. Remember, I tried to summon an imp once upon a time.”

"John,” She shook her head. Her voice cracked. "You don't understand. I knew the moment I felt it John; that wasn't an imp. That was a Katraph. It was a hunter John. They only purpose they serve is to capture people and drag them back to their world.”

John felt his blood chill. For the first time he realized the possible outcome of his actions, and they terrified him. He swallowed his fear as best he could and pulled her closer, tucking her head against his chest so that her tears stained his silk gown. "I'm so sorry Lily. I had no idea, I didn't want to do that to you. Never again, I promise.”

She nodded quietly

"Hey, the Magisters are tearing the city apart right now to find who did this. They found me in a tiny room in a cellar in a wing of the palace where no one has been for years. They'll find the summoner.” He lifted her to look in her eyes. "We'll stay here on the estate. Try and enjoy the rest of our time here. In a couple of weeks we're going to go home, we're going to move into our brand new home, and we're going to raise a beautiful family together.”

She smiled weakly and nodded. "I know.”

"Good.”

Slowly she rested her head on the cushions near the children, and John rested his head on her shoulder.

"John.”

"Hmm?”

"I wanted to tell you tonight: I don't want to be queen anymore. I am going to let someone else take office next election. I want you to give me another child, I want to feel life in me again. Soon, before Ban and Laurelie get too old to play with a sibling. And I want to spend my time with my family, not running a country. I've been doing that for too long already.”

John blinked in surprise; this was the first time she'd given any indication of being unhappy with her office. He couldn't disagree with her though. He lovingly licked over her neck, still trying to sooth her nerves. "We should talk to Ban and Laurelie; explain to them that they're going to have siblings. I remember being furious when I found out mom was pregnant with Andrea. I don't want them to feel that way.”

"You're right. We'll do it in the morning.”

"Lily?”

"Yes love?”

"You looked amazing tonight, and I love you.”

She didn't respond verbally, but her tail coiled around his and a smile curled the corners of her mouth. Her tears had stopped, and she seemed more at ease. John stayed awake and watched her until her breathing evening in sleep.

Frostmire Ahead

"Are you awake dear one?" John cracked open one eye at the soft query from Lily; the bleary red orb made his exhaustion obvious. His wife had tracked him down to the patch of soft grass where he lay sprawled in an inelegant pile, sunning himself in the noon heat.

"I am." He mumbled. He drew one wing back in against his side to make room for her to lay down at his side. She pressed into him and rested her chin over the back of his long neck, her scales slightly cool compared to the warmth of the daylight.

"Are you feeling any better?"

"Some. I napped a little and didn't have any dreams. Just tired now, and sore." She hummed out her concern. Feather light touches of her magic began to press against him and seep into his scales. The air shimmered in front of his eyes as her spell rolled over him like a warm wave. Cramps and aches throughout his body eased.

In the two days after the demon attack John had learned quite the lesson about exposure to demon blood. Even tiny amounts could cause physical ailments like fatigue, insomnia, nausea and cramps. More moderate amounts could cause night terrors and paranoia. Ingesting it or getting large amounts of exposure could lead to insanity and death. For two day and two nights he'd barely gotten a blink of sleep. He would lay shivering and sick for hours, wanting nothing more than to sleep. When he eventually did doze off he suffered terrible nightmares.

Nightmares of a twilight hellscape: a void with no up and no down. There was neither ground nor sky, just vast mountains of twisted flesh floating endlessly through the emptiness. Across every blistered and swollen mountain of flesh, thousands of creatures scurried like upturned ant-hills. Some were grotesque obscenities of tearing claws and exposed muscle. The demons. Others were recognizable as mortals. Humans, beastfolk, and races he hadn't seen before. The victims.

In his dreams there was no escaping it. Everywhere he looked he saw images of cruelty and torture so vile that he frequently thrashed himself awake, only to be violently ill. Lily had hoped that by cleaning the blood from him so quickly he would be spared these effects; the first time he'd awoke vomiting in the dark, she'd sent the children with Andrea to sleep in the house. It spared them from witness their father in this state. She had stayed with him near constantly, weaving spells and soothing him with her presence.

Finally on the third night, it had seemed to break. He slept a few hours, and awoke feeling only the natural illness of sleeplessness, and not the delirium of demon's blood. "Do you feel well enough to have a bath? We should get that grime off of you and get you something to eat."

John's stomach gurgled hungrily at the thought of food. "Yes, thank you love."

She assisted him to his feet. Lily's battle-mages had disassembled their tent to clean and purify it, but a smaller pavilion had been set up for them to use in the meantime. Maribel awaited them, and opened the flap to reveal an enormous tub of water that had been lowered into the ground. Steam wafted softly from the surface. With Lily's help and reassuring touch the red dragon slid bonelessly into the tub. His mate sat on her haunches at the edge, propped up so that her forepaws were in the water helping steady him. Maribel handed her queen a length of soft cloth, and the dragoness began to wash her husband.

"Lily the place I saw in my sleep, is that real?"

Her face tightened grimly and she focused her gaze on her work. "Yes. That's their home."

"And all those people?"

"John, you can't linger on this. This isn't something that you process and work through. I've seen what you've seen, and I have helped many others

through it. You have to push it out of your mind. You have to let it fade, because there is no accepting that place and the things you see there."

John swallowed and closed his eyes.

A vast crater of bone and teeth, filled with blood and bile that frothed and boiled. In the pool, hundreds of people floated. Men, women, children. As they were rendered down by the broth their screams of agony pierced the dragon's lungs and stole his breath. The reek of it filled his nose, stung his eyes. Blood, shit, bile, and an overwhelming stench of decay. Demons ringed the crater and tormented any that tried to escape. Just one atrocity amid an ocean of suffering.

"Ah!" He jerked in the bath, splashing it about as he looked around the tent in panic. Just a memory of a dream, but still enough to send tremors through him. Hot tears streaked on his face. He turned to meet Lily's eyes and saw faint trails on her cheeks as well. After a moment the dragoness nodded to Maribel. The battle-mage reached into her satchel and withdrew a thin glass bottle. Lily waited for the human to pull the cork out and then delicately took the vial between two claws. A pale lavender fluid swirled inside.

"Drink this John. It will dull the memories of the last few days. You won't remember much of today but you will sleep well tonight, and in the morning you will feel better."

John didn't argue or hesitate. With the utmost trust he allowed Lily to tip the bottle into his mouth. The concoction was thick but almost flavorless. A very faint pepper lingered on his tongue as the liquid slid down his throat. He smiled weakly and settled back down into the water to let Lily resume washing. Her tender attention with the washcloth lulled him, and the medicine began to work rapidly. After a few minutes of lounging in the hot bath a bone deep lethargy spread through John's frame. It was as though his body was already asleep and was just waiting for him to close his eyes. He did. A moment later he opened them.

He was sitting in a lukewarm bath. Lily was in the tub with him, cradling him to her so that his head rested on her shoulder. "Mmorning Lily." John

mumbled. His jaw felt tired, it took too much effort to move his tongue. He closed his eyes again.

The bathwater was cold. Lily was still with him, but she had gotten bigger. She used her size to help lift him out of the water. "MornnninnLully." He slurred badly. He could barely open his mouth to get the words out. Lily eased him to his feet.

She smiled warmly and bumped her nose against his. "How are you feeling John."

"Sleep." He managed.

"I know, but you need to eat first. I need you to stay awake for a moment so that I can carry you on my back."

"Yup." He bobbed his head heavily, and did his best to steady himself. Lily crouched deftly to slide her head under John, hefting the now smaller dragon up over her shoulders so that he sprawled between her wings. The tent flaps were pulled wide open to allow Lily and her passenger to ease out. The sky was dark, only flickering fire-pits illuminated the grounds of the estate. It must be entirely too early in the morning if it was still this dark. Where was the sun? He closed his eyes.

"Yes, you can bring the kids in to say goodnight. He might not be awake, but it will be good for them to see him looking healthy."

The lovely sound of his wife's voice roused him once again. He was in bed, huddled up on a massive pile of cushions and blankets that smelled faintly of pine and lemon. The warmth of Lily's body surrounded him nearly completely.

"Goooood morning." He drawled out the first word as though he forgot how it finished.

"Dad?" John felt a brief stir of awareness when he heard his daughter's voice. He lifted his head enough to peek over Lily's tail. His parents were

there, standing protectively over his children.

"Awww, Laurelie, Ban. You shouldn't be up this early."

He couldn't help but feel worry prick at his mind. His children looked afraid. He began to stand, intending on going to them. Lily hushed him and pressed him back down to the cushions with one hand, tightening around him just a little closer.

"Shh. Don't worry children. Your father is just feeling very very tired. He'll be okay in the morning. Do you want to say good night?"

They both scrambled up onto the cushion and wrapped themselves around his head, burying their faces against his. Johnathan purred deeply in contentment, and closed his eyes.

Something seemed odd, John decided immediately after he opened his eyes and found himself floating weightlessly over an ocean of becalmed water. Night sky stretched overhead in a riot of color provided by countless glimmering starts. Starlight reflected off the water below, giving the illusion that John was suspended in a cosmic sea.

He tried to twist in the air but all of his movements had a dream-like quality. His motions took no effort, and yet felt like he was moving through molasses.

"Hello?" His voice echoed across the still ocean, but sounded muffled all the same.

"John." Lily's voice quickly calmed his rising panic. He turned over on himself in the air, trying to find the source of her voice, but only really succeeded in twisting himself upside down so that his tail hung down in front of his face.

The tinkling laughter of his wife preceded her as she descended in front of him, gracefully floating down to an even level with him. But Lily didn't look

entirely like Lily. She was radiant, literally. Her entire body blazed with jade light, and licks of vibrant flame danced around her. Between her horns, above her brow, a crown of woven gold floated perfectly still.

"Lily? Is that really you? Where are we?" The red dragon continued to try and orient himself in the air as he spoke, until he was floating roughly upright.

"It's me, but not the real me. This is a dream John. One that I have crafted into the magic of the tonic that you drank. This is an image of myself that I added to the dream to help comfort you. Does that make sense?"

John blinked in bemusement. "I suppose that explains some things, but why do I still feel like I'm awake?"

"You weren't supposed to. It is rare for a person to be lucid for this. It is a good sign though."

"Why is that?"

"It's complicated love. You'll just have to trust me."

He rolled his eyes. "Well, you certainly sound like my wife, but may I ask why you made yourself look uh...divine?"

Lily laughed again playfully, and drifted forwards over the silent sea so that she could wrap herself around his body. "I didn't. I programmed the dream, but it's still drawing on your mind to create it. If I look particularly 'divine' it is because your mind made me this way. Thank you, it is quite flattering."

Heat rose in John's face, and he felt the insides of his ears flush slightly.

"I take it this means that you have reconsidered your earlier assertions that dragons cannot be majestic."

"I really hope the real Lily isn't watching this." He groaned

The dream-image of his beautiful wife just smiled and nibbled the edge of his ear. He enjoyed the attention for a moment before more questions pressed in on him.

"Okay, so why the dream?"

"We needed to override your mind, make sure that the only dreams you could have tonight were peaceful. This is designed as a place of tranquility and rest, to allow you time to recover, to forget. Along with the other effects of the tonic, it is a highly effective treatment."

"Ah." He belatedly remembered the hellish dreams. Only vaguely though. The details were blurred and faded. He remembered the feelings of dread and disgust, but not so much of the reasons behind them.

"Since you *are* lucid, you can turn the dream into pretty much whatever you want, but I would highly recommend taking this opportunity to rest. You may not feel it right now but you have had a traumatic experience and you body still remembers that." Dream figment or no, the concern in her voice was real.

John closed his eyes gladly, and allowed his body to relax in the weightless embrace. "Who would I be to ignore such sound advice?" He whispered.

They wrapped around each other tenderly, their legs gripping each other, their tails and necks entwined, and Lily's wings around him in a blazing emerald cocoon. Lily hadn't been completely correct. John did feel the trauma in the back of his mind, like a loose tooth in the back of his mouth. And like a loose tooth there was the temptation to poke at it, to work it free. He remembered what she said though, if only barely. There was no coming to terms with the things that he had seen.

He focused on the present, and let himself drift off as Lily guided them in a slow spiral through the air. Together, they spiraled slowly through an endless field of starlight.

Birdsong stirred John from his slumber this time. Lily had grown her size to the point that she could completely encircle him, trapping him in her embrace. He felt a bit befuddled he realized he wasn't quite sure where he was or how he got here. Days were lost to him in a hazy soup of memory fragments and unpleasant emotions. He remembered the dream though. That was crystal clear.

As he began to stir, Lily stirred with him. Her mouth split open into an enormous yawn, her long tongue curling down and out to form a loop as she slowly kneaded the bed and wriggled. Finally she opened her eyes and fixed him with a smile that left no doubt that she had been peering into her programmed dream.

"I have to admit John, your dream version of me might be more attractive than the real thing."

"Don't worry," he had to stand and stretch to reach her for a kiss, "you may not be literally burning with inner fire, but you'll always be a goddess in my mind."

"In your mind." She chuckled as she met his lips again and again.

"Still not majestic though. Nonsense, that."

She growled at him. With her larger mass she bowled him over and pinned him beneath her bulk. A rain of kisses and love-bites rained down upon his face.

"I'm adding a new title," She belted out the words between each attack of affection.

"Eldest scion." kiss.

"Of the royal house" nibble.

"Sanjeia" kiss.

"Ruler of the Blazing Coast" nip.

"Queen Lililethan the Majestic."

John could only squirm helplessly and laugh at the lovely assault. He tried wriggling himself loose with his wings and tail, but to no avail.

"You wouldn't."

"Mmm-hmm. And her Royal-Consort, Johnathan, the bravest fool that ever did get turned into a dragon."

"That's not a title."

"Fine. Johnathan the Brave. I am a generous goddess."

"You are, my queen."

She rolled off of him slowly and trotted cheerful around their bed in victory. With each step she shrank a fraction in a swirl of magic until she had had returned roughly John's current size.

After a moment she stopped, her face slowly becoming serious. "Are you feeling well John?"

"Yes. I honestly don't remember much between going to that dinner and that dream last night. Just fragments."

"Good. I know it sounds like a strange treatment but it's the safest way. As a silver lining though, now that you've been exposed to demon blood you will be much less susceptible in the future."

"That is comforting in a way, but I have no desire to encounter a demon ever again." He padded off the bed and began dressing himself in his silk shroud. "Do you think Andy might have breakfast ready? I'm starving."

The estate was active this morning. His father's farm, like farms all around, were beginning to bring in the last harvest for the year as summer turned into fall. There would a festival in Pastock once all the harvest was in; John wondered if they'd stay long enough to attend. As they approached the back of the manor where the family had been taking its meals Ban and Laurelie came dashing around the corner.

"Dad! Dad!"

He had just enough time to brace for impact before they hurled themselves into the air at him. With a well timed flap of his young wings, Ban landed on John's back in a pile. Laurelie simply whumped into his chest like a little scaly wrecking ball. He wheezed out a breath and reached up with one forepaw to catch her. They chattered at him, each interrupting the other after practically every sentence.

"Are you better now?"

"Mom said someone made you sick!"

"Yeah but then you squished them so we don't have to be scared!"

"Did you squish someone?"

"Did stuff squirt out like a bug?"

"Easy!" John chuckled as Lily helped him hoist Laurelie up onto his back. Both children perched on his shoulders.

"Was it that guy mom got mad at? Did you squish him?"

"No, I didn't. I did get in a fight with someone and they did make me sick, but that's all done." John said diplomatically. "There will be no more squishing or talk of squishing. We don't want to scare anyone okay."

"I'm not scared. I'ma bite anyone that fights you. Biting is even better than squishing."

"Ban." John tried and failed to sound stern. His son clambered up his neck, small claws catching on his scales for traction until the youngster was perched between his father's horns. The young dragon was only too eager to herald their presence as they entered the gardens. He stood up so that one forepaw slid down onto John's eyebrow and shouted. "Grandma! Grandpa! Dad's awake!"

Albert and Victoria were seated at the large wooden table nestled into the shade of the garden. Albert was puffing away at his pipe with a bundle of papers in his hands, while Victoria poured tea.

"John! Good to see you back on your feet again." Albert rolled out of his chair and marched forward to hug John around his neck. John blinked in surprise; his father hadn't ever been cold to him, but he wasn't normally the hugging type either. The red dragon tentatively lifted a forelimb to gingerly return the hug for a moment before the old man was moving again. "When I heard the news I couldn't believe it. We were all asleep when you got back, and the next morning you were sick."

Moving more spryly than his age might suggest, Albert quickly shoved some chairs out of the way so the dragons could huddle up to the table. Victoria finished setting bowls of steaming tea down for her son and daughter-in-law. "Children, could you go inside and see if your aunt needs any help bringing food out?"

Both youngsters reluctantly gave up their perches on John's back, motivated only by the promise of food. Victoria maintained her composure until her grandchildren were out of sight before she lifted the hem of her morning-dress to rush to her son with tears in her eyes. John sat so that he could hold her as she sobbed against the silks of his chest. "You've had us so worried John! Demons! Demons tried to take my son away."

"You're feeling better then John? We've heard you at night, and it was-" Albert stopped. He glanced at Victoria, her face pressed into the crimson scales of John's neck. "You're feeling better then?" His voice was hoarse.

"Much better." John's spoke softly, rocking gently as he held his mother. "Lily had some medicine that has helped greatly. It's muddled my memories some but maybe that's for the best."

Victoria finally pulled away and dabbed at her eyes with the corner of a sleeve. She was smiling but her eyes were still wet. "I'm so glad. When we heard you crying out at night it brought back such awful memories."

John knew his mother had several relatives in the Magisters' ranks. He also knew that some of them had died apprehending summoners or escaped demons. It had been one of his biggest worries the first night he'd summoned Lily on accident. He swallowed a guilty lump and lapped at his tea. He hadn't given any thought to any of them when he'd acted at the banquet. He hadn't considered the consequences of fighting a demon and losing.

Andrea's arrival interrupted any more conversation. The woman looked positively discombobulated. Her hair was loose and uncombed while her eyes had the frantic look of someone at the end of her rope. She carried a platter of sliced meats and cheese. Ban and Laurelie pranced after her; they each carried a covered basket, but the scent of fresh fruit and fresh bred divulged their contents. Andrea greeted her brother with a tight hug as well, once she'd liberated the baskets.

"You have no idea how glad I am to see you up again."

"Oh! I had no idea that you were so worried!"

Lily laughed. "Andrea has been extraordinarily kind. She has tended the children for the last couple days so that I could care for you."

John suddenly understood his sister's exhaustion. "Oh, hah!" He couldn't contain a small laugh, even as he squeezed his sister a little tighter in gratitude. "Thank you Andy. What do you think? Can't wait to have your own bundle of joy?"

"Do they ever stand still?" Was her only response.

Finally everyone took a seat around the table and food was shared around. They ate quietly, more out of necessity than anything else. John was ravenous. He'd barely eaten in days and most of what he had eaten had come back up. He didn't have time for conversation as he shoveled food into his maw. He didn't even spare time to stack up the bread with the assorted charcuterie like a civilized person. It was only after the ache in his gut had finally settled that he pushed back his plate and settled down in satisfaction. Lily noted that he was finished with a glance and cleared her throat for attention.

"Since we're on the topic of children, there is something John and I wanted to discuss with you all."

There was? John didn't remember any discussion about children.

"Ban, Laurie," Lily cooed out, "How would you two feel about having another brother or sister?"

The children reacted with instant excitement, but John's heart skipped several beats. What? When? She hadn't induced her cycle, had she? Had he missed that somehow? He caught Lily's eye, and his shock must have been evident on his face.

Lily spotted his panic, and after a moment recognition arrived on her face. Before his heart attack could progress any further she leaned in to whisper in his ear. "I'm sorry love, didn't mean to give you a scare. I'm not pregnant."

John felt some tension go out of him. He didn't mind the idea of more children, he'd just prefer to know about it first.

"We talked about this earlier, but I think the tonic broke down that memory. I'll explain from the top."

John nodded and relaxed: their quick exchange went unnoticed among the excitement. Albert and Victoria were both grinning like fools, decorum forgotten. Andrea just glanced at the two young dragons that were now chasing each other in loops around the table and glanced back at Lily like she

couldn't believe they were thinking about more.

"At the end of my current term I'll have ruled the Blazing Coast for nearly a century. I feel like I'm ready to pass on the crown. It has been-" she had to stop a moment and swallow. "It has been a very long time since I've belonged to a family and I want more of it. I want to spend more time with my children, and I want John to spend more time with you all."

Lily paused, and glanced at her husband. John smiled at her reassuringly. This was the first time he'd heard her express dissatisfaction in her office, but her words brought back a distinct feeling of deja vu. He shifted slightly on his haunches so that he could lean against her.

"So I plan to make arrangements to transfer power, and we," she wrapped one wing around her husband, "are going to try for another child."

"Wonderful!" Victoria beamed.

"It's a good choice dear." Albert couldn't help but speak to Lily as though he were her wise elder, despite the fact that she'd just mentioned that she was at least a century old. "I spent most of Johnathan's childhood away for work. It was only after we'd thought we'd lost him that I began to realize I'd missed a large part of his life."

John felt a certain bashfulness at the outpouring of emotion, but it was not enough to suppress the soaring joy in his heart. His parents were only too happy to hear of more potential grandchildren, as if he had never changed at all.

"I'm gonna have a brother!" Ban crowed, "I'ma show him how to climb, and how to hide, and how to bite!"

"No! I'm getting a sister, and I'll show her way better than you will!"

"Maybe," Lily whispered loudly before the bickering could dissolve into a real argument, "if we're all very lucky, you two will have a brother and a sister."

The conversation meandered over the remains of breakfast. John's family were entranced by Lily's tales about the Blazing Coast, and they seemed eager to make plans to visit. Eventually the demands of the day forced them on their separate ways. Albert had to supervise the last of the harvest. Victoria and Andrea had business in the city.

"Mom, dad!" Laurelie collided with Lily's foreleg and wrapped herself around the green scales there. "Can we go play with grandpa in the field?"

"Um, I don't think Grandpa is playing." John said uncertainly.

"It's the flails," Albert chuckled. "They think the threshers out there are playing with the flails. It's fine John, they can tag along. The harvest is almost all in, they can't do any harm."

For safety's sake, Lily sent Maribel and a dozen men with them. Both to watch the children and lend a hand.

By the time everyone said their goodbyes, John and Lily were left alone at the table. John sighed peacefully and leaned in to snuggle against his love. She nibbled on his ear again and shifted to better accommodate him. Maybe the trip had not gone entirely as planned, but John couldn't complain about his current situation. His family was together, his parents seemed to adore the idea of even more grandchildren, and Andrea had proved to be a wonderful aunt. For the moment, all was right in the world of John. He wasn't sleepy but he closed his eyes to indulge in the preening he was receiving anyhow.

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He drifted in and out for a time, simply enjoying the comfortable embrace, before a scent started tickling his nose. Almost immediately he felt his blood heat and his heart rate quicken.

When they were first trying for children Lily had explained to him the process. Dragons didn't go into estrus seasonally, nor were dragons fertile year round. Instead, a dragoness could induce her heat. Once so induced, they

had a window of a few days to conceive. If they failed to do so, that estrus was wasted. A dragoness could do this a handful of times in her life before becoming barren, so it usually only done with immediate intentions. By the scent that was currently burning through his veins Lily just entered that window.

"Mmm, not wasting any time are you?"

She laughed, her voice tinged with embarrassment. "Sorry John, it entirely slipped my mind that you may have forgotten. I induced this morning while we were playing."

"I'm glad you managed to bring it up before it became noticeable. Otherwise I would be very confused at the moment."

"Good, I hope it's perfectly clear what I want you to do to me."

"Did you want to go somewhere private?"

"More private than this?"

"Um." John opened his eyes and looked around his parent's garden. Tall hedges shielded most of the garden from view, and various planters and pots added even more cover. "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Why? Your mother and sister took all the house staff into town with them. All the laborers and most of our people are out in the fields with your father and the children. The only people nearby are Tobias and his guards."

"Just feels strange, I guess." He mumbled as she brought her lips to his and began to guide him into a position on his back.

"If you really want to stop, we can take this somewhere else. Of course that takes valuable time away from other...activities." She emphasized the last word by climbing atop him, straddling the base of his tail.

"Wouldn't want that." John groaned as her teeth found one of the clasps

around his neck. She nibbled at it until the fastener came undone, allowing the silk garment to fall away.

"No we would not." She undid another clasp around his wing. "Shouldn't have gotten dressed this morning, could have saved even more time."

"I happen to like it. It feels like unwrapping a gift every time."

"Well you'd better get started then."

The dragons teased over each other in a tangle of red and green limbs as they undressed one another. The process was made somewhat slower by the fact that neither wanted to pull away from the other's contact. Neither of them were satisfied until they were resting bare scale to bare scale. The pavers were cool against his back, but Lily felt fiery as she sprawled atop him chest to chest. She shifted slightly to align their hips better and began to roll her body against him. John breathed deeply to fill his lungs with her scent, just as her face filled his view. Her eyes were wide with excitement and her jaws hanging open in a needy pant. She had positioned herself so that with every rocking motion her entrance rubbed over his slit, slowly depositing warm smears of her arousal there.

"Oh!" Her grateful sigh of pleasure made his heart flutter as his body responded. Pressed together as they were, his crown pressed directly into her as it emerged. With every beat of his heart he grew a little deeper into her passage. Green scales danced and shivered against his as her body was wracked with lust. Despite her obvious need, Lily remained pressed to him nearly motionless. John gasped a breath as her stomach clenched, her muscles squeezing and rolling him around inside of her. She didn't need to move at all to coax him to full arousal.

"I'm a little jealous you know." John took the opportunity of their slow romance to continue the conversation.

"Jealous of what, love?"

"It's strange for a man I suppose," he kissed her neck, "but I'm a bit jealous

of the bond you must feel, with our children growing inside you." John rolled his hips up, grinding his vent against hers, fully sheathed inside of her.

"I remember laying with you at night, feeling Ban and Laurelie kicking and moving in your belly. I wondered what that must be like."

Lily flashed him a devilish grin and finally lifted off him just enough to push forcefully back down. A groan escaped through her smile, "You know, you could find out."

Any response he might have made was cut short as she squeezed her tail between them to coil around the base of his shaft. The long appendage was quickly coated in their mess. "It's not an impossible dream, but remind me later when we're both clear-headed." Her tail uncoiled to seek out his rump, the narrow tip sinking slowly into him.

"For now I want you to focus on getting *me* pregnant. I want you to fill me up so I feel fit to pop. Understand?"

John could only gasp and nod as she began to hump more vigorously against him. Lewd slapping sounds filled the air from their hips meeting violently. As if that wasn't enough, John could actually hear the slurping of her trail thrusting slowly into his backside. With their years of practice it didn't take long for her to find his prostate. Lily rolled her tail back and forth over the little warm bud deep inside him. The heavy scent of her estrus drove his instincts wild. He only just managed to squash the urge to flip her over and rut her; instead his body built towards a chemically driven peak.

It didn't take long for the combination to bring John to the edge of his climax. With one foot he reached back and grasped Lily's tail, only to shove even more into himself. He could feel her insides wringing him like a fist trying to pull him ever deeper inside of her.

"Lily!" He breathed her name and yanked her down, mashing his jaws against hers in a frantic kiss as the spines and ridges at the tip of his shaft engorged, unfolding into a firm plug as he went rigid in orgasm. Lily's breath hiked against his. She convulsed right along with him as he spewed an ever

expanding bubble of warmth into her. Her wings mantled out over them and thrashed in the air. The winds scattered debris, but also served to cool the burning heat the two dragons had build up.

The emerald dragoness was the first to collapse in satisfaction. Her wings dropped to the ground and she lay still, aside from her lips and tongue dancing in their ongoing kiss. A few moments later, John had to break that kiss. He let his head fall back down to the pavers as he reeled in the continuing climax; he continued to rock back and forth against his partner as his body worked overtime to make sure that every drop ended up exactly where it belonged. Just as she'd demanded. Until he'd emptied himself and his flared tip retracted, the red dragon would remain locked in the throes of orgasm.

"My queen." A voice startled both of them. John let his head roll to the side to see Tobias standing at attention and studiously staring straight ahead. "There is a Lord Falthwain at the gate asking to see you."

Lily sighed dreamily as she continued to milk John, even as she addressed her battle-mage. "Falthwain? Oh, him. Please inform him that we are currently occupied. He is welcome to wait, and we should be available in, what? Twenty minutes would you say John?"

He could only gurgle as his tongue drooled out of his mouth. He couldn't even bring himself to feel embarrassed at the moment with Lily atop him and her tail buried in his backside. Certain things were more important than pride.

"Very good my queen." Tobias turned on one heel and left them alone to finish their fun.

Eventually, John's senses did return to him. With a wince he used the foot gripping Lily's tail to drag it out of his rump.

"Well dear one, I might be a bit optimistic in saying so, but I think we may have accomplished our goal." Lily chuckled. She clenched tightly around his retreating manhood to keep any of his seed from leaking out.

"I don't know that I've ever felt quite this stuffed." The dragoness awkwardly climbed off of him, and then immediately rolled onto her back with her thighs clenched tightly together.

"You did ask for it." He teased, beginning to lick himself clean.

"I did, and I am not complaining, but we are left with a problem. I don't think I can actually walk without dribbling a trail clear across your parent's estate. All lewdness aside, that is one explanation I don't care to make. Do you think you could be a dear and go fetch a blanket or a towel or something?"

"Of course love, give me just a moment." Feeling the urgency of his wife's request he hurried to clean himself and secure his silk gown.

"You might want to get more than one actually. Oh! Please let Tobias know that if Lord Falthwain is still here, we will receive him in the garden."

"You're going to meet him now? When you're-" he gestured to her unusual position, "full?"

"He's the military chancellor. I'm hoping he's bringing news of the investigation on the demon summoner. Someone brought a Katraph into the city John, and I want to make sure they don't do it again."

"Ah." He nodded and gave her a peck on her upside-down chin. "I'll hurry then."

It didn't take long to locate Tobias, and John quickly returned to the garden with a stack of towels draped over his neck. As he entered the sheltered garden he found Lily still laying on her back with her head raised. She was staring curiously at her own belly, prodding and feeling it with both hands.

"Is something wrong?"

"John, look at this! Come feel this!" She half laughed.

He stepped forward and placed one paw where she indicated. The normally tight muscles of her stomach lifted just slightly in a new swell, lifting the edges of some of her scales.

"What is that?"

"That's you, you dolt!" She rubbed her hand over his. "When I said fill me up I didn't mean like a balloon." She was shaking her head and grinning though as she grabbed a towel from him and stuffed it between her legs. After a moment she grabbed another. Finally she buttoned her silks back up, holding the cloth in place. Just in time too.

Without the distraction of their rutting, both dragons clearly heard the humans approaching. They seated themselves discreetly so that the lump of towels between Lily's legs was hidden.

"Blasted man picked the worse time to show up." She grumbled. "I would rather be basking in the afterglow." John soon recognized Hershel's voice nearing the garden. Then, accompanying the lord, he recognized his father's voice. And if his father was here...

Before John could act on his premonition, Ban and Laurelie were tearing into the garden, their claws scrabbling on the stone flooring.

"Mom!" Ban leapt and sailed through the air and landed on Lily's back. The dragoness's eyes widened in alarm as she clenched her hindquarters tighter. "Do we have flails back home? I want a flail!"

The entourage of humans arrived before Lily or John could address their son's new-found fascination with farming tools. There was no herald this time; Lord Hershel Falthwain simply strode into the garden side by side with Albert. Maribel and Hershel's man Leroy stopped just outside the row of hedges, eyeing each other with disdain.

"My Lady. Sir." Hershel gave them each a small bow.

"Good day Lord Falthwain. I see you've met our children."

"I have had that pleasure." He allowed a small smile to creep onto his otherwise severe face. "They are quite spirited. I hadn't expected them to be so much like my own children, but there it is."

"You have children?"

"I do, three daughters and a son." Hershel didn't exactly beam with pride, but he did have a wistful gaze as he regarded Ban and Laurelie.

"Oh, well I should like to meet them some day."

Hershel nodded and glanced at Albert. John's father had a strangely pleased look on his face.

"That's actually the purpose of this visit. Maybe I should explain so we can avoid repeating ourselves." He cleared his throat and straightened his posture. "My history with your family has been an unpleasant one, almost entirely through fault of my own." He paused briefly to search for words.

"I will not lie, I am sometimes too protective of my domain. The Frostmire doesn't have much commerce. Until recently our trade was limited to timber and ice for Pastock's larder. When our imports from the east were threatened by your silks, I made some regrettable decisions. But today I'm here with my hat in my hands to make amends."

An idle thought passed through John's mind that Hershel could probably use an actual hat to hide his widow's peak, which he quickly stuffed down. The man was trying to apologize.

"Lord Hershel has decided to become a limited partner. He will invest in our import business, and we will agree not to import any common consumer textiles." Albert added to clarify.

"It turns out that the markets for luxury silk doesn't actually overlap much with the market for cotton or mohair." Lord Hershel looked almost angry as he spoke.

"It did not occur to you to look into that at the start, before spending years trying to sabotage their business?" Lily's tone was less than benign.

Hershel took a deep breath. "I cannot make any excuses for that. I am a stubborn man, and I spent much of my youth in war. I am used to my opponents either ending up dead or surrendering."

"Lord Hershel, I am not heartless. I have experienced the tolls of a life spent at war. But I have also dealt with many cruel men exactly like you, who are eager to pander to me when I arrive, only to resume their ways when I leave. You understand what I mean?"

"I do."

"So what reason do I have to believe that you won't simply abandon any promises once you've gotten what you want?"

John had a hard time believing her poise, given the situation. Given the fact that she was currently afraid to even stand up, she was perfectly collected in the face of the human lord.

"What I want? I haven't asked for anything."

"You don't have to ask for a thing to want it. Maybe you just want me to go away quietly at this point, now that we've benefited you."

"I don't see how-"

"First-" As stern as Lord Hershel might be, it was very hard to talk over Lily when she raised her voice enough to rattle the leaves on the trees around them.

"You managed to get some some measure of prestige as our host at that banquet. I didn't miss your cousin announcing us on your behalf. While there, I managed to belittle most of your rivals for you. And since my husband killed that demon, quite likely saving your life, I'm sure as our host you have

benefited from the good sentiment from the other guests." Lily paused a moment to catch her breath.

"As far as I know, up till the day we arrived you have been at odd ends with my husbands family. My family now. So what reason to I have do I have to think that will stop when I leave?"

John watched Hershel carefully, worried about the man's reaction to such a dressing down. To his surprise, the man gave the biggest smile John had seen from him yet.

"I am starting to realize why a man might forsake his identity for a chance to woo you." He glanced briefly at John. "I can only promise that I am already acting in my own best interests. Albert has agreed to a fair rate of return on any investment."

John's father nodded in confirmation.

"When we put this to contract, not only will I be getting paid decently, but I will have guaranteed non-competition from my biggest threat. I realize now that I have more to gain from partnering with your father-in-law than I do from fighting him. Does that satisfy you?"

Lily considered him a moment before returning his smile, "Yes." A heavy silence lingerd after her statement, at least until the children got bored.

"Moooom!" Ban hopped up and down on her back. John watched her jaw clench along with her backside.

"Yes love?"

"Can we get flails?"

"Oh! Can we get one of those sword-sticks?" John could only imagine his daughter was talking about a scythe.

John spoke up before anything catastrophic could happen. "Dad, do you

think you could entertain Lord Hershel for a few minutes? Lily and I were in the middle of continuing our conversation from breakfast when you arrived and we need a moment of privacy."

"Our conversation from...Oh. Oh!" Albert blushed. "Ah, my lord! If you'd care to, I'll share a draft of whiskey with you. He's been suffering some from exposure to the demon, let's give them some privacy." They left with Leroy.

"Ban, Laurelie, go with Maribel and see if you can't find a snack in the kitchen."

Maribel looked between the two dragons with a knowing smirk before nodding. "All right you runts, lets see if your aunt left out any sweets."

It didn't take any more that that to convince the children. Ban hopped down off his perch and disappeared around the corner, chasing after his sister.

"Oh heavens, thank you John." Lily gasped out a tight breath. "Let's get out of here quick, before I actually do pop."

"It was one of the cooks. Newly hired at the palace. We don't know why, or if he was working with anyone else. The man went berserk. Killed one of the Magisters before they could cut him down." Hershel's face was grave as he gave the news.

Lily and John had paid a quick visit to the nearby river to get cleaned up and to allow Lily to relieve some pressure. Not walked the estate grounds as a group. Ban and Laurelie were too restless to let them sit at a table so Albert had offered Hershel a tour of the orchard. The two men walked between the two grown dragons as the youngsters raced ahead of them in a rough and tumble game of tag. Maribel and Leroy followed them at a distance. The two bodyguards kept an eye out, but were apparently caught up in a discussion of their own.

"They didn't find the circle then?" Lily asked

"Not yet, but every man available is sweeping the city. We'll find it. Intact circles can't go undetected for long."

They had been making a loop around the walls of the estate. Turning a corner around the orchard, the group caught sight of the main gate. As they approached it began to swing open to admit a group of riders and a wagon.

"Oh, that must be Andrea and your mother." Albert waved ineffectually and picked up the pace. "They were arranging our contribution to the festival this year." Andrea and Victoria were just dismounting the wagon as they arrived at the gate.

"Aunt Andy!" Laurelie screamed giddily as she rushed up to dance around the woman's feet.

Andrea appeared a little more composed than before, and knelt down to scoop up Laurelie in her arms. "What is this? This looks like a belly that needs tickling."

"No!" Laurelie squealed in laughter as Andrea mercilessly ticked her ribs.

Albert made quick introductions between Hershel and the new arrivals.

"Victoria, Andrea, it was a pleasure to meet you, but I've already stayed later than intended. Since we have made it around to the gates again, I should take my leave." Hershel gave the two women a stiff bow and kiss each on the back of the hand.

"Of course. It will be getting dark by the time you get back to the city." Albert shook Hershel's hand and then returned the formal bow. "Thank you for your visit. I'm glad to finally have this nastiness set aside."

Leroy approached with the horses. Maribel walked with him, and shook his hand firmly before letting him continue on.

"Queen Lililethan," Hershel managed not to slur her name as he mounted his horse, "I do have one more request. An invitation actually, for you and

your husbands family. We recently got our first dusting of snow in the Frostmire. I understand your country is mostly desert. May I ask if your children have ever seen snow?"

No Ground to Give

The first traces of pink and orange were starting to trickle over the western horizon, casting a meager illumination over the valley. Outside the walls of the Wright's estate four dragons and two dozen humans had already gathered in a flurry of activity.

"I'm having second thoughts about this." Andrea was muffled by a thick scarf. She was bundled head to toe in heavy furs, standing with her arms out to her sides as Tobias checked her flight harness She pulled the scarf down. "Didn't you tell Lord Hershel that dragons didn't like carrying people?" Fear made her voice tight.

Lily was distracted trying to keep Banzhrakin from fidgeting. The young male kept trying to twist and turn to watch Maribel fit him with a safety harness. The green scaled dragoness replied without turning her head. "We have been known to make exceptions.."

"Mom, my scales itch!" Laurelie interjected. The little green and red tiger-striped fledgling was wearing an intricate setup of canvas straps that looped around all four legs. The loops were connected over her back and under her belly. Each strap was wrapped with wool padding, and she kept wedging her claws under the pads to itch at herself. A small satchel hung off one hip, her silk clothing safely folded away inside.

"I know love, but you have to wear it if you want to practice flying." Laurelie pouted but didn't argue.

John tried to reassure his sister even as he padded away across the field. "Don't worry Andy, we wouldn't be taking you and the kids up if there was even the slightest danger. You'll love flying I promise."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to make room. We're a bit small to be carrying passengers at the moment."

He paused a short distance away and glanced around. When he was satisfied there was nothing to accidentally crush, John closed his eyes and focused. A decade of training under Lily's tutelage had greatly expanded on his skills as a mage but he still lacked the effortless grace she had with her magic. He had to concentrate and slowly pick at the weave of spell work that was currently shunting off most of his mass. Bit by bit it began unraveling, and bit by bit his body began to expand. His outfit expanded with him, one of the many enchantments layered into the silk. Finally the last tendril fell away, and John opened his eyes. Andrea stared at him in complete shock from some thirty feet below now.

"Johnathan?"

"Yes," Andrea jumped as the word rumbled out of his massive chest like a rock slide. He winced and lowered his volume to a murmur. "Sorry. It's still me."

He lowered himself to the ground, trying to appear non-threatening.

"Johnathan, why are you the size of a castle?" Her voice had the strain and pitch of someone on the edge of panic.

"Relax Andrea." He dropped his head until he was resting his chin on the damp earth. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm still your brother, just bigger."

"Relax? I can't relax next to a monster that can swallow me whole!"

Monster. The word was an icy thorn in the dragon's heart.

"Oh, that is quite enough!" Lily's imperious tone brought everyone to a halt. Even Ban stopped squirming. Lily released the young wyrmling and marched towards Andrea, who responded with the same instinct any lady of the court might when addressed by a queen. She snapped to a position of attention and spun to face the approaching monarch, "My Lady, I'm sorry! I meant- what are you doing?"

The young woman backpedaled as Lily herded her towards towards her brother. John went slightly cross-eyed watching as the two approached the end of his snout. His wife offered no chance for escape or protest; she gripped Andrea's right wrist in one clawed hand and pulled it inexorably up to press it against the scales of John's nose just above one nostril.

"Look at your brother." Lily ordered. Andrea's eyes were frightened and confused as she turned to meet John's gaze. After a moment she closed her mouth and swallowed, allowing her fingers to carefully rub against his polished crimson scales. Lily's voice was quiet, but hard as steel as she whispered the next order. "Now, tell him you think he's a monster."

The young woman flinched as if she'd been slapped. Guilt spread across her face. She didn't speak; instead she reached up with her left hand as well, placing both palms against John's warm hide. He exhaled slowly, his steaming breath washed over her and ruffled the fur of her coat: a silent acceptance of a silent apology.

"Your brother is no longer human." Lily let the edge fade from her voice. "We are grateful for how well you and your parents have handled this massive change so far. John wanted to thank you by giving you this opportunity to experience flight, something scant few humans in history have ever shared. There is no offense in saying no; it must be terrifying to leave the ground when you cannot fly yourself. But I will not stand by and let you insult him for the effort."

"Yes, my Lady."

"Now, do you want to see the world from dragon-back, or do you want to remain here on the ground?"

"I'd like to fly with my brother, if it pleases my Lady."

"Good." Lily walked away briskly, and in a matter of moments had emerged to her full size. She stood noticeably larger than even her husband, but her admonishment had chilled any further fear out of Andrea.

"I'm sorry," Andrea hesitated a moment before leaning in and spreading her arms across his snout in the best hug she could manage. "I know you're not a monster."

He huffed out a soft rumbling purr. "It's okay Andy. Things have been going so well, I forgot that there's still a lot to get used to. I should have warned you."

Andrea clung to him for a minute, before she eventually pulled away to allow everyone to finish their preparations. They mounted up as the sun's first rays burned into the valley. Maribel took her perch on Lily's back, facing towards her tail to keep an eye on Ban, who was tethered down between his mother's wings with a sturdy cord. John carried Tobias and Laurelie in a matching position, with Andrea seated just slightly forward on John's neck, looking ahead. The remainder of the crew all cleared away to give the dragons room to take off.

"Remember John, I want to avoid casting a shadow over any livestock or settlements. I doubt anyone in this country has seen a full grown dragon before, and I'd like to avoid a panic."

"Right."

"Ban, Laurelie, stay on our backs until we tell you it's okay. Now everyone hold on tight, it'll be a bit bumpy until we find clear air."

Lily waited until she felt Ban and Maribel hunker down against her back before lunging forwards. She trotted a few steps to build momentum, before her wings snapped out with a thunderclap of wind that launched her into the air. John gave her just a moment to clear the path before following her into the sky. Andrea yelped through her scarf as he leapt into the air, and clutched desperately at his harness. Clear nictitating lids slid reflexively over John's eyes as the first wind of the flight hit his face, protecting his sight as they accelerated.

It would have been hard for him to explain what Lily meant by clear air to someone that couldn't feel the wind like they did. The webs of his wings

spread out across the sky as wide as the sails of any ship. Every inch of that skin was incredibly sensitive to the temperature and movement of the wind. The sky was layered like a cake, with each layer being a different temperature and a different density. Each layer flowed in its own way, and at the boundaries the air mixed, causing turbulent crosswinds and unpredictable updrafts. His wings felt all of this and more. Some deeply recessed part of his brain decoded the information, dictating how he should angle the finger struts, how far to extend each flap, what angle he should hold his body.

All he had to do was let his body do what it was designed to do, and keep an eye on his wife's backside.

Lily led them into a current of warm air. They followed the trickle as it fed into a column of rising heat large enough that it punched through the layers above. The thermal caught them and shoved them skywards with dizzying speed. Andrea's legs clamped tightly to his neck during the rapid ascent. And then they were gliding effortlessly. They exited the thermal into a calm and even northerly tailwind that pushed them along as smooth as glass. Below them the Lead Hills rolled away in all directions. The early morning sunlight reflected off the many streams and rivers of the valley like a thousand golden filaments, and The Nortosk Mountains filled the northern horizon with a long line of sparkling snow-capped peaks. In the distance, a flock of ducks veered away from the oncoming dragons as they began their journey south. Andrea's thighs relaxed, and he felt her shift on his back.

John turned his head just enough to glance back at his sister. The tinted goggles she wore hid her eyes, but her arms were spread wide in the wind as she turned from side to side trying to drink in as much of the scenery as she could. A moment later the faintest hint of her whooping laughter reached him over the wind. A smile was plastered to his face as he turned back to follow his wife. A few minutes later they passed over the lip of the valley, leaving the last of the farms of Pastock behind in favor of the rugged pine forests of the highlands. He could just make out the winding ribbon of the north road, nestled between the trees.

Ahead of him, Lily flared her wings, spilling some forward speed. He heard her shout something, but the wind carried it away. On her back Ban

spread his wings and quickly soared in the air.

"Laurelie! Up!" John shouted over his shoulder. His daughter trumpeted her glee and spread her wings.

He wished he could turn fully and watch his daughter, but he couldn't do that and maintain a level flight for her. Instead he had to settle for quick glances back every now and again. He did catch a good view of Ban though, as his son let his wings carry him all the way to the end of his tether. Used to gliding, Ban spent a frantic moment of flapping and tumbling before he stabilized himself in the air, extending his body into a smooth arrow shape with his limbs tucked in tight against his sides. His son gave his best victory roar and a moment later was answered by Laurelie. John glanced back to see her similarly stable, her tongue flapping in the wind with glee. She was blinking furiously as she tried to get used her clear inner eyelids. She'd never flown fast enough to trigger them before.

The young dragons stayed up for as long as they could, but their flight muscles were still untested and lacked the endurance of an adult. It wasn't long until Ban's wings faltered and he dropped to his mother's back. Laurelie stayed up a few minutes more, but eventually John felt her weight settle against his spine. Lily waited until she felt safe that the fledglings had secured themselves before speeding up. Her wings cut through the air in endless arcs. As the terrain rose beneath them they had to climb higher and seek a new tailwind. John tried to gauge their altitude carefully by how thin the air felt in his lungs. While the dragons could soar miles above the ground, the humans on their back could not. The temperature dropped rapidly as they traveled upwards and north. Ice began to build up around John's nostrils, melting and refreezing with every heavy breath.

The treeline broke abruptly ahead into acres of cleared timber. Several small villages dotted the deforested land, each of them marked by a plume of rising chimney-smoke. The ground was blanketed in pearly white snow, granting a stillness that could only occur in winter. The granite bulk of Falthwain castle was silhouetted against the snow at the far end of the cleared area. They skirted the villages in a long path around the back side of the castle, where it nestled into the mountains.

The castle was respectable, situation on top of a rocky spur above the forest. It was not the huge fortress of Pastock Palace, but it was well designed and better positioned. It guarded one of the passes into Pastock Valley, and had seen its share of bloodshed in past conflicts. In peace time some of the old defenses had been neglected, but it still made an imposing sight. They circled it silently twice before finally landing a few hundred yards from the castle, just in case anyone got nervous with a cannon or a bow.

Their passengers wasted no time in dismounting. Ban and Laurelie wore smiles, even as they shivered from the cold and exhaustion. John knew his children weren't at any risk from the cold, but he still wanted to throw a blanket over them. Andrea stumbled off of his shoulder on numb legs. Her scarf crackled with ice as she unwrapped it, revealing a smile.

"Ban, Laurelie, stand in front of your father, his breath can warm you up. Andrea, you too dear if you're cold." None of the three could stop grinning as they huddled in front of John. The exertion of flight had kept him more than warm, and soon the sweltering gusts of his breath had melted a patch of snow around the trio. Maribel and Tobias knelt to help the fledglings strip their harnesses and redress in their silk gowns.

"Dad! I was flying dad!" Ban hopped excitedly, bounding up to press his tiny paws to his father's nose. His son's wings still drooped with fatigue, almost dragging on the ground.

"I saw. You and Laurelie did very well. I'm proud you both managed to stay up so long. It won't be long before you two can fly on your own."

Laurelie was smiling broadly under her father's praise but it was obvious that her extra few minutes of flight had taken a toll. John could see his daughter shaking under the straight of standing upright. Andrea scooped the child up before John could say anything. Laurelie squeaked indignantly, but a moment later she was trying to burrow into the folds of Andrea's coat.

"Well, you were right John." Andrea approached him with her niece, until the young dragoness could stretch her neck out from the shelter of the coat

and bump her nose against her father's. "That was...amazing. The palace, the city, the valley, it all seemed so tiny from up there. Everything I know, everywhere I've ever been in my life, I could see it all. It almost makes me wish for wings myself."

John rumbled happily. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Lily's satisfied smirk.

"Riders from the castle." Tobias interrupted their reverie. He checked his sword as he spoke, making sure the blade slid free from the scabbard. They waited and watched the formation of armored cavalry as it advanced. Perhaps a score of men. Hershel and his cousin were easily recognizable in the lead. "Should have walked. Bringing horses near a full-size dragon is stupid." Tobias drawled.

"Well go tell them," Maribel retorted, "before the lord gets thrown from his horse and brains himself."

Tobias grunted an affirmative. His sun-darkened skin stood out starkly against the snow as he trudged to meet the riders. A brief exchange of words served to convince Hershel to dismount his men. Half of them stayed with the horses, and the other half marched on foot to meet the dragons. In John's estimation, most of those men appeared at least as reluctant as the horses. Even Hershel came to a stop well out of normal talking distance and eyed them warily.

"I must admit, I was not prepared to welcome guests of such immensity." He shouted across the distance.

"My apologies Lord Hershel. We had to resume our full sizes to carry passengers." Lily didn't have to raise her voice to be heard. "We will return to a more familiar size shortly."

"Shortly?"

"The spell is safest when the body has returned to a resting state."

"Ah." Hershel glanced back at his men. After a moment of consideration he didn't bother ordering them to follow him as he moved closer; only Leroy accompanied him. Hershel's younger cousin looked nervously at the two dragons but quickly steeled himself and flashed a smile at Maribel.

Hershel stopped a few paces away from where Lililethan was sitting and gave her a deep bow. "Well, allow me to welcome you to Falthwain Castle. I can't wait to introduce you to my family."

Lily stood, slowly enough not to alarm the newcomers, and gracefully returned his bow, lowering her chest and head somewhat and angling her wings towards the ground like a cloak. "Thank you for the invitation Lord Hershel. I would love to meet your family, but is it possible to delay that introduction? I don't want to be rude, but I would like my little ones to be awake for it."

She glanced over to Andrea, who had taken a seat with her back against John's nose. Ban and Laurelie were huddled in her lap, fast asleep.

Falthwain castle contained a handful of single room cottages within its walls. Most were living quarters for higher ranking members of the staff, but two were set aside for visitors. They were too small for John and Lily to fit into, but the cozy interior was perfect for the two children to recover from their flight. Andrea tucked them into the bed as their parents watched from the doorway.

"Queen Lililethan, as we're waiting on the introductions, would you care for a tour?"

Lily and John shared a brief glance. Neither was willing to leave the children unattended in an unfamiliar place.

"My Queen," Maribel spoke up, "We'll remain behind if you desire. Tobias and I can always explore after you return."

"Very well," Lily gave her reluctant assent.

Hershel turned to his cousin. "Sir Leroy, take four men and coordinate a guard with them. I want the queen's children protected like my own."

"Lord Hershel," Andrea curtsied, "if it doesn't offend you, may I skip the tour and rest here as well? I'm afraid the flight was much more excitement than I am used to."

"Of course, I'll have food and drink sent. A cup of mulled mead does wonders to fight back the cold here."

"Thank you my lord." Andrea curtsied again, her manners of full display.

"Queen Lililethan, Consort, shall we?" Hershel gestured onward with one arm and they followed him back towards the gatehouse.

When they were far enough away to be out of human earshot John heard Andrea's cautious voice. "They're comfortable leaving the children here?"

Maribel's response was cheerful and definitely loud enough for Hershel's guards to hear it. "Oh, it'll be fine. Everyone knows that if the Queen or her husband even think that someone here is trying to hurt the runts, this castle and everyone in it will be a smoking ruin by nightfall."

"Oh."

John smirked and felt just a little bit of his concern fade.

"I'm afraid the tour won't be as long or as interesting as some. To be honest The Frostmire is a quiet place, especially in the winter. Once the snows set, most of our time is spent around hearths, telling stories and drinking mead."

"That doesn't sound like the worst way to spend a season." Lily mused.

"I agree. Many of my countrymen do not." He paused, "If you are up to the hike, we do have one attraction that you will not find anywhere else. Our namesake." John knew that The Frostmire referred to the region, but the

name had come from a holy site in the mountains. It was supposed to be glorious, though it was not normally open to visitors.

"How long of a hike?"

"Not long. If we move quickly, under an hour."

"You don't wish to bring your men?"

"You have entrusted your family to my care, I don't see why I shouldn't do the same with you. I can't imagine there are many threats to me with two dragons at my side." The human lord lowered his voice and glanced meaningfully at them. "I also want to use this opportunity to speak with you and the Consort in private." John had rarely had his official title used so often in a conversation.

The crunching of their footsteps in the snow was the only sound until they were well past the gate, away from any eavesdroppers. "I am a student of history you know."

"Oh?" Lily asked with one raised eye.

"They are hard to come by, but there are still a few records of the purge of Northern Meridia. It's a curious thing though. Every record and every historian all have accounts of one general leading the purge. They use different names, but they're all the same. The Emerald Destroyer. Jade Harvester. Queen of Embers. They say that the smoke from the cities she razed blocked out the sun for a year."

Lily's face was passive. She didn't give away any hint of emotion. John was careful to keep his face equally neutral when Hershel turned to judge his reaction. Before they had married, Lily had sat with him and told him much of her past. "I want to make sure you understand who I am before you commit to a lifetime with me." She had said. She hadn't gone into every detail, but she had explained enough that John felt only annoyance at the man bringing up literal ancient history.

"Lord Hershel, I am not interested in cleverly worded questions or passive-aggressive accusations. If you have something to ask, ask it plainly."

"Am I correct in assuming that these are all references to you?"

"Yes."

He gave a satisfied nod. "It was quite entertaining to watch the other lords try to browbeat you at the banquet, knowing who you are. It was foolish of them to think they could push around any dragon. Let alone the heir to the oldest bloodline in the world. Queen among dragons."

"Have you met any other dragons Lord Hershel?"

"Two, actually. They live on the east end of the Nortosk range. Our caravans pass them along their route. I've spoken with them briefly a few times."

"Do they strike you as the sort to bow to a Queen?"

"Bow? No. But when I mentioned that you had dealings here they seemed very eager to stay out of your way."

"Lord Hershel, does this line of inquiry have a point, or are you just trying to show off how well-informed you are?"

Hershel held up his hands in supplication. "My apologies Queen Lililethan. I have a point. I only bring this up because your past only makes your present that much more impressive. You have wrangled a land of warring desert clans into one of the fastest growing nations in the world. Not through force and violence, but through decades of work."

John had to work harder to keep his face neutral as the lord's words brought a strange mix of emotions. He was always proud to hear Lily's accomplishments recognized, but he didn't really like Hershel. He especially didn't like the man layering flattery on his wife. He couldn't really bring himself to feel threatened though; he could only imagine the amusement on

Lily's face in the unlikely occurrence of the human trying to seduce her.

"I appreciate the accolades, but I worked with hundreds of dedicated men and women to make that happen. I can hardly claim credit."

Hershel nodded, "Perhaps not, but you guided the process. You have that experience, and that is what I ask of you. Pastock is rotting from inside. We are stagnant. Our lords spend their time fighting for influence and power. We do not elevate the smartest or most worthy; instead we promote the most devious. Whoever can cheat the best, wins. Meanwhile our poor grow poorer and more numerous and our coffers are looted bare. If we do not make changes, our country is will die. It may be a decade or a century from now, but it's coming."

I hate politics. John thought to himself. He couldn't help but feel guilty for mentally degrading the man, and then agreeing with everything he just said.

"I believe the Consort knows this."

No, no, no, don't bring me into this. I got out.

"I know his history as well. I understand the desperation that drove him to make that summoning circle; though I am curious how he managed to call you to it and convince you to help him." Hershel fixed John with a quizzical stare. John glanced at his wife for support, but she simply gave him a wink behind the human's back.

"That is not exactly how it played out." He finally responded. "I didn't summon her. You can't summon a dragon. But they can hijack a summoning circle to come to you."

"Oh." Hershel blinked in actual surprise.

"So she came to you and...?"

"Took me prisoner. Look, Lord Hershel, this is not a topic I want to relive. The queen took the next two days thoroughly disabusing me of the notion of

ever dealing with demons again. It was not a pleasant experience." John lied through his teeth.

Lily had to cough to cover her laugh.

"I see. I apologize, Consort. I'm simply trying to understand how you won such a boon."

"Lord Hershel," Lily interrupted forcefully, "I have explained to you that the transformation was an extraordinarily fortunate mishap, and not the original intent of the spell. If it *had* been my intent, I would have never have sent Johnathan back here. He found his way back to me to seek my help in reversing the changes. When it became obvious I could not, he agreed to stay so that I could teach him." Lily joined his lie.

"Now that you pried so intimately into our lives, I am going to ask you to drop this topic. I will not contribute to dangerous magical experimentation attempting to duplicate the process. If you have a request to make, it is time you made it."

Hershel's face went flat. "You're right my Lady. My request is simple. Let me send some of my men with you. My cousin, a few of my advisors. I want them to observe and learn. They don't need any authority, and I'll pay for their boarding. I want them to see a functioning state, without the corruption we're too familiar with. I want to make it happen here."

John felt sure that he was doomed forever to swing back and forth between hating and respecting this man.

"That's all?"

"It would not be such a small request here my Lady. Allowing foreign agents into your affairs would be seen as the height of stupidity, and unless you fancy having every noble in the country try and do the same I wouldn't announce that you are even considering my request."

Lily snorted. "I can see why you were cautious about returning Johnathan.

Very well, if that's all you ask, granted."

Hershel hesitated. "Actually before you decide, I owe the Consort another apology, for a deeper offense." He paused their climb up the hillside and turned to face Johnathan.

"Consort, I was not honest at the house about my reasons for sabotaging your father. A large part, the majority even, of the reason was because of you."

"Me?"

"When I first began hearing reports of your fate, I was furious. In my mind, you had been granted this extraordinary power, an opportunity to change things here, and you fled with it. You fled to foreign shores and used foreign gold to enrich your own family. I felt you didn't deserve it. Any of it. I felt this way right up until the night of the banquet. And then you risked your life, and more, with absolutely no hesitation, to protect people who hated you." He had to pause to collect himself.

"I am not a mage, but I do command the Magisters. I know what a Katraph is. I know that if it had struck you with that tail you would have been pulled straight to hell. Yet you killed it before anyone else in the room even drew a blade. As if that wasn't enough, I am doubly indebted because I have reason to believe that the Katraph was sent for me."

John felt his mind reeling in the stream of new information. "Oh, um. It's nothing."

"Perhaps not to you. But that night has caused me quite a bit of self-reflection." He cleared his throat. "I'd heard that you had been poisoned by the demon. I went to visit the estate and speak with you then. It was early the next morning. I heard the screaming before I ever made it to the gate, and had to turn back. I couldn't face you, knowing that you were suffering on my behalf."

John had to look away. It was somehow even harder to witness such a

display of emotion from a man that he had only ever seen stone-faced.

"There. It is out in the open." His voice was gruff with emotion. "However that alters your consideration for my request, I accept it. I can only beg your forgiveness for my behavior." He finished and resumed the hike before John could answer. "The Frostmire lies ahead, shall we proceed?"

The entrance to The Frostmire was an unusually narrow slot canyon in the face of a sheer cliff. The snow was deeper here higher up the mountain. A squat, fortified building stood just in front of the canyon, with a squad of guards waiting out front. The guards must have expected them, as the men snapped off a stiff salute to their lord. They didn't look unduly terrified of the dragons approaching.

"My Lord." The sergeant at the head of the squad greeted Hershel.

"Sergeant Harwick, I trust The Frostmire remains safe."

"It does sir."

"Good. Your men can escort me back. The Queen and her Consort can have some time to explore in peace while we have your relief sent. I doubt anyone will be keen to disturb them."

"Very good my Lord."

"You are leaving?" Lily asked.

"I find The Frostmire to be best experienced in solitude and silence my Lady, but I will stay if you would prefer."

The dragoness considered for a moment. "Very well. We'll meet you back at the castle."

Hershel nodded. "Stay as long as you'd like. If your children have risen by

the time I get back I'll send word with the relief guard. They should be here within two hours. If they are not, please inform me so I may have them empty the latrines for dereliction." Sergeant Harwick smirked.

With a crisp bow to his guests, Hershel fell in smoothly at the head of the squad and marched them away, leaving the two dragons staring at the narrow canyon entrance to The Frostmire.

Lily waited until the sounds of snow crunching had faded before speaking. "So what do you think of the lord's sudden change of heart?"

John had to think for a moment. He hadn't really played these games since he'd met Lily. She was the Queen, and he the Consort. He had what limited authority she granted him, which was plenty enough. Now he was out of practice. "He seems genuine, and it all fits together very nicely, but something doesn't sit quite right."

She nodded in agreement with his assessment. "He is far too driven about the topic of your transformation. I think he is genuine about the apology and wanting change here, but I get the feeling he imagines only himself able to bring that change. I wouldn't be surprised if he's on his way back to consult with his mages to see if we gave up any useful bits."

"I hate politics." John spat aloud this time.

She smiled at him and turned back towards the slot canyon. "Should we take a look? Have you been here before?"

"I haven't. It's somewhat sacred to the locals here. Outsiders have to be invited."

He followed her into the dimly lit gorge. Icy rock walls extended a hundred feet up on either side of them, just far enough apart that the dragons could squeeze through. The walls got closer together as the rose, so that the canyon was almost a tunnel. At the other end they could see a shimmering, aquamarine light.

"Is that a flute?" Soft, haunting notes drifted down the corridor towards them, unorganized and random but growing louder with each step.

Finally the cliff walls broke into a wide bowl, meeting overhead to form a sunless cavern. The floor seemed to be a perfect sheet of ice, untouched by snow and crystal clear, extending down further than the light could penetrate. All around the floor, seemingly at random, tall spires of hollow ice rose upwards in branching clusters. Puffs of steam piped out of the straws, sometimes in groups, sometimes one at a time. Each puff sent a gentle breathy note through the cavern, and as the steam rose higher it would strike a layer of moss that blanketed the stone ceiling. Every time the moss was hit by a warm blast it would illuminate in an azure glow. The eruptions created an ever shifting scene of softly shimmering light and sound.

"Oh my." Lily barely breathed out the words; even the dragon queen hesitated to disrupt the peace of the place. They padded in silence. In the center of the cavern there was a single stone slab rising above the ice, covered in the same glowing moss. The lovers sat down on the convenient platform and watched the spectacle continue unabated around them. John wondered how long this cavern had existed, displaying its beauty to an empty audience until some fortunate soul had stumbled in.

He caught a glimpse of his wife. She was smiling with an almost childish joy as she watched. "Beautiful." He whispered.

"Yes it's simply- oh!" She started speaking before she turned and caught him looking at her, and not the cavern.

He couldn't help himself, nor did he want to. Before he knew it he had his lips pressed to hers. It was not a kiss full of burning passion, but of something slower, something more cherished. "I love you Lily. I love to see that smile."

She blinked at him, the tip of her tail flicking rapidly and the edges of her wings fluttering. He was certain if his wife could blush, she would be blushing. The held each other there, hands and mouths exploring like it was their first time together. One by one the toggles of their gowns fell away, exposing them to each other as The Frostmire continued to put on its show

for them. "John," Lily finally paused him long enough to breath his name. Her voice was husky as it washed over his face.

"I wanted to show you something."

"Hmm?"

Before she could lose her nerve, Lily reached down into the pile of clothing around them, searching for something. She fumbled for a moment before withdrawing two silver discs, each about the size of a large coin. One side was very slightly convex and smooth, and the other very slightly concave and covered in a strange fuzzy material. "You made me think of it the other day when we were in the garden. You said you wished you could feel what it is like to carry a child in you."

"Yes," he shifted away from the discs warily, "in a hypothetical sense. I didn't actually mean I wanted to get pregnant myself."

She rolled her eyes. "This won't get you pregnant. We would need much more complicated magic for that," she teased. "It doesn't do anything permanent. It allows a person to temporarily swap sensory input with another body. It was built to allow healers to feel a patient's symptoms first hand, for easier diagnosis. It didn't take long for it to find alternate uses."

"Alternative uses?"

"Sex, John. Some adventurous couples use them to experience their partner's point of view."

"And you want to try them now?"

"Well, it's the last day of my estrus, and I don't know for sure if I have another one in me. I thought, you know, if you wanted to see what it's like this is the chance." She actually looked a little bashful, "And I am more than a little curious about how it feels to be a male."

"Oh!" The fluting notes of the cavern extended into the echo of his

exclamation. She fidgeted nervously as Johnathan worked up his courage. He wasn't sure if he was entirely comfortable with the idea of being in his wife's body, but if it was something she wanted this much he was willing to make the attempt.

"Yeah, okay. Let's give it a shot. I can't promise anything, but I'll give it a try."

"Oh, thank you!" She grinned again, her eyes gleaming with joy. "I've never used these before, so I don't know if this will work for either of us, but thank you for trying."

John allowed her to reach up and place one disc on the back of his head, where his spine met his skull. The concave shape fit perfectly and stuck there with hardly any sensation. If he hadn't felt her put it on, he wouldn't know it was there. She reached up tentatively with the other disc behind her head. "Deep breath, here we go."

John's vision went fuzzy for just a moment and a confused shiver rattled him as his brain tried to parse two confused signals. Then everything snapped back into clarity. John found himself lost among a sea of foreign sensations. *Everything* felt different to him. His mind spun in circles as new inputs flooded in. The way he was sitting, the way his wings were settled on his back, how tall he was. The way his vent felt puffy and hot as he squeezed his thighs together. John became immediately aware that his new body was very, very aroused. He looked up, and found himself staring at his own face. His eyes were wide with excitement.

"Lil-Omyword!" John spoke in Lily's voice, and then immediately clamped a hand over his snout. That hand was clad in green scales.

"Wow!" John heard himself, and watched his body lift a hand to flex the fingers, apparently mesmerized by how the shifting light played over it. "How do you feel John."

John dropped his hand and forced himself to speak, even as he heard his wife's voice issue from his mouth. "I don't know, this is very disorienting."

Lily, in his body, nodded and looked up to meet his gaze.

"Do you want to take it off?"

John took a deep breath to steady himself. Even the way his lungs filled felt and sounded different, and every inch of his body felt too sensitive. "No, just...let's just sit a moment love, let me see if I can get used to this."

Lily nodded. She reached up and placed one hand on his cheek delicately. John watched emotions play over his body's face as she caressed his face. Her reassuring touch calmed him. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the fact that it was Lily touching him. She may be wearing his body, but it was still his Lily inside. His breathing slowed as he let himself relax. "Remember John, you can take it off at any time. We will only take this as far as you want to."

John nodded, opening his eyes. She watched him carefully. It was his face. His shorter, rounder muzzle, his longer horns, his red scales. But the expression of concern and compassion was impossible to mistake. This was his Lily. "Can we lay down?"`

Her movements were careful as his wife settled on her side, one wing spread in invitation. John settled down with her, pressing his belly to hers, feeling his own heartbeat thumping against the scales of his chest. Lily draped her wing over him like a blanket, sheltering him under its warmth. Tentatively she reached up again, waiting for him to object. When he didn't she placed her broad crimson paw against his neck, stroking down his viridian scales with an expression of wonder on her face.

John kept his eyes on hers, letting the play of dancing lights over her eyes distract him from anything but her gaze. He felt Lily's breath rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Her hand tenderly explored his chest. She held him close, content simply to feel his body pressed to hers as they had done many times before. He relaxed in her embrace, letting the strangeness of the situation get washed away in the familiarity of the act. When he finally felt brave enough, John let his tail coil with hers. He focused on those point of contact. The caress of his scales over hers, even reversed as they were, was

comforting. More than comforting actually. With Lily's body buzzing with hormones, he soon felt himself fidgeting restlessly. He wanted more.

"Heavens Lily, are you always this riled up?"

She laughed, the sound came out rumbling and deep, but it was still her laugh. "Only when I'm with you John." Her breath tickled his ears. Closer and closer each exhale as she waited again for him to stop her. Then her tongue. Up one edge of his ear, a pause, down the other. Tracing down his neck, then back up to his jaw. John watched out of the corner of his eye. The crimson lips parted to nibble haltingly, pausing every few moments to wait for sounds of disapproval.

A sudden thought sent John into a fit of nervous giggles, Lily's voice uneven and shrill with his words. "We're acting like a couple of virgins."

Lily paused, and John could feel her mouth curl into a smile against his throat. "In a way, I suppose we are right now."

"I suppose." His reply came out more like a groan as she suddenly squeezed him tighter. It was like there was no limit to how heated Lily's body could get. He could feel trickles of moisture beading between his thighs, sliding down his scales. The need had built to a point that John swore he would erupt at any moment.

"Mmmm," Lily purred. "I can smell it. I can taste it on you John." She wriggled against him, her temporary body reacting naturally to the heavy cocktail in the air by trying to grind and hump. A moment later he felt something new prod the scales of his belly. She jerked in surprise, and then forced herself to be still. "John, are you okay to keep going?" The desperate need in her voice sent a shiver up his spine.

John faltered, unsure for a moment. Lily was panting into his face now, but despite her obvious desire she remained motionless. Behind that desire was the same concern. She had trusted him with her body, so he would trust her with his. He reached one paw clumsily between them, searching until it came in contact with the crown of her shaft. The angle was different than he was

used to, but John still knew exactly where to squeeze to elicit a pleasant croon from Lily. He felt a certain satisfaction as she melted under his touch, her eyes closing as he let his fingers dance up and down the throbbing length of her cock. The organ pulsed, and a spurt of slick fluid splashed over the scales of John's fingers.

It was almost automatic when his paw released her and brought the messy digits up to his face. He flicked his tongue out. To Lily's stricken body, the taste of a virile male was like ambrosia. He felt his pulse speed up into a non-stop drum roll and suddenly knew he needed much, much more. He was moving, sliding down her body, his tongue flicking over the scales of her chest and belly as he traveled. Every lick drove John faster, until he was staring point blank at the glistening pink skin of Lily's borrowed shaft. The ridges of flesh just behind the head were already partially engorged and more dribbles of pre were oozing from the tip.

John had sucked himself off many times before; it was practically the only way for him to masturbate if Lily was absent. It was very different this time though. He parted his lips, wrapping them around the tip.

Lily moaned loudly as he dove deeper. Her crown slid along his tongue, the spines and ridges tickling briefly before he allowed it to sink into his throat. Still on her side, Lily bucked into his mouth the rest of the way. The sudden penetration made him heave slightly as the slender neck of Lily's body bulged around the intruder. She wrapped her thighs around his face, smothering him with the overwhelming male scent. She fell still after that, letting him adjust to the position with his lips pressed flush against her slit and his head nestled between her legs.

John nursed on her very lightly. He knew that she wouldn't last long, and he also knew that he didn't want her to finish in his mouth. She almost did anyhow. The newness of the experience was too much to allow him to tease her, and despite him barely moving he could feel the head of the shaft begin to swell in his throat.

"John! John I'm gonna cum!"

He pulled his head back with a lewd gurgle, streamers of saliva and a copious amount of pre stretched in a web between John's lips and Lily's shaft. She panted, her eyes rolled back with the effort of holding back her climax. John let her catch her breath as he did the same.

"Uggg." She groaned, "I don't think I can do that again John. I feel so full it hurts."

However surreal their situation was, John couldn't help but feel another surge of excitement at her words.

"I never thought it would be so fucking hot to watch myself suck you off. Watching myself swallow your cock..." She throbbed once more, spitting another spurt onto the end of John's nose.

"Okay, that's it." John declared. With no ceremony he got to his feet. Before Lily could move he spread his hind legs out and flipped his tail over his back. John glanced back over the lithe, curvy body that he currently wore and locked eyes with Lily. "Fuck me."

Lily needed no more encouragement. She struggled to her feet, her erection bobbing between her thighs with every beat of her heart. A moment later her weight landed on his hips. It may have been a new position for John, but Lily's body knew exactly what the do. John found himself dropping his chest to the floor, hind legs splayed out. He rolled his hips up and back and wriggled. It was as natural as breathing right in that moment. Lily crept forward on her back legs, drawing closer and closer until finally, the spade-tip of her shaft was bobbing just a breath away from its target. She shivered with the effort of restraining herself.

"Last chance to back out. I don't think there's any stopping after this."

"Oh please *do not* stop." He could only gasp back.

Lily grunted, and eased forwards. She found his waiting lips, parting them, and then sinking in. Her ridges tugged and pulled, and then a few inches in she found the small bump of the clit hidden inside of John's sex. Her stiff

spines raked over it and fired off John's climax like a cannon. All vision of the cavern faded into a white haze, and a pleasant drone filled his ears. Some part of him was vaguely aware that he had slumped nervelessly to his knees, and that Lily had buried herself in him enthusiastically as he twitched and squirmed in her grasp. That part was small compared to the thoughtless bliss that washed over him. It could have been a minute, it could have been an hour. John couldn't tell as he finally came to. She had shifted up and over him as he had sunk to his knees, so that she was draped across his back, one foot wrapped around his thigh as her heart hammered against his back.

"You okay John?"

He had to swallow to clear the drool from his mouth. "Yeah. Keep going."

She drew back, just a few inches, and then pushed back in. "So goddamn tight. Not gonna last, love."

"It's fine. Don't stop." There was no room for shame. Lily's body demanded to be satisfied and filled, and John had no intention of denying it.

She couldn't get herself into a rhythm, so close to the edge. She simply gave in to the instinct to breed, grinding against him with wet slaps of her hips meeting his.

He writhed as he felt himself stretched and filled over and over. He hadn't quite come down from his first peak, and realized he was quickly building towards another..

"Oh!" He breathed. "Fuck me!" He had meant is as an exclamation of surprise, but Lily seemed to take it as a command. She sped up, rolling her body against him in a sinuous undulation that rolled her shaft around inside of him. John could feel the flesh of his rump shaking and bouncing from the impacts. Her heartbeat thrummed inside of him, each beat making her shaft pulse against his walls. Every thrust got just a little bit tighter as she began to swell. Soon he felt her grow still and heard her breath hitch in her throat. John knew what came next, and the brief instant of anticipation was all he needed.

He didn't pass out this time as he was wracked with tremors. His passage squeezed around Lily as her crown flared out. The raking of those spines across his flesh made John lightheaded with pleasure, and he almost missed the first blossom of warmth deep in his belly. Not that it would have been a problem; there were plenty more to follow. She throbbed inside of him, and each throb was answered with another rippling convulsion to draw her cum deeper. Slowly John's spasms grew weaker, until finally he was left panting raggedly. Lily had gone slack atop him, her head resting on his shoulder. The only muscles that seemed to be working were the ones currently working to fill John to his limit.

The haze of need and lust settled in the afterglow. As his racing heart finally calmed down, he had time to sit and appreciate the situation. Lily was curled up atop him with her tail still tucked tightly under his. She mewled softly as she experienced her climax as a male. John tried to comfort her for the occasion, as she had done so often for him. He curled his neck back so that he could nuzzle her, gently licking along her jaws.

"You okay Lily?"

"Mmmmmyep." She slurred, still working to breed her mate.

The hot pressure of her seed continued to spread and build. When it finally tapered off John could only marvel at the satisfied fullness in his belly. Lily's body was only too happy to accept every drop offered.

"Wow." She mumbled.

John smiled, and shifted his hips. "You ready to take this thing off? Should probably do it while you're still plugging me up. I don't think I can hold all that in."

"Yeah, I'm good." She mumbled, still not moving.

John reached up to slip his claws under the disc on his head, and tugged.

The transition was a little less disorienting the second time around. In a blink John rolled from one type of afterglow into another. He sighed just a little bit sadly as he gave up that wonderful fullness for slight ache of having been recently emptied. An experimental tug showed that he wasn't quite free yet, so he relaxed where he was. Lily turned to grin foolishly at him, still caught up in the euphoria. Her eyes glittered with the reflected light of the cavern.

"What did you think?"

"It was good." He admitted. "I don't know if I can say I'd want to make it a regular thing though. It's still a tad strange to feel like I'm having sex with myself, even though I know it's you."

"It is." She agreed. "I kept hearing all those little squeaks you made with my voice and getting distracted by them."

"It was worth it for this. I had no idea your estrus was that intense. How do you deal with it?"

"It's only rough the first day. After that your mind filters it out. I'm guessing it was probably worse for you too since you've never had to deal with it. I know when I got erect I almost couldn't control myself for a second."

"Maybe it's something we can save for special occasions."

"Maybe. Like I said, there are other more thorough options, but I think we've been adventurous enough for one day." She mumbled, yawning. "You think you can pull out yet? We should probably get back to check on the children."

"Just about. I know we're not supposed to use magic for mundane tasks, but you might want to magic away some of this mess. I doubt whoever visits next will be happy to find our puddle here, and I didn't bring any towels."

Ban and Laurelie were definitely awake by the time John and Lily returned. They landed in the courtyard to find a small crowd gathered. Four human children ran around with squeals of laughter, chased by or chasing two small dragons. Andrea, Maribel, and Tobias stood in a loose circle with Leroy and some of the other guards. Hershel stood nearby, a petite, slender woman by his side. The human lord was smiling broadly, more animated than John had ever seen him as he gestured at the playing children. Lily stared in amusement as Laurelie sprinted by her with a peal of laughter, a young girl of four or five clinging to her back giggling right along with the tiny dragoness.

"Ah, Queen Lililethan, Consort." He bit his lip, looking over at Laurelie and her passenger. "Anita dear, maybe you shouldn't be-" Whatever he was about to say was lost as Laurelie scampered away, bearing the whooping little girl out of earshot.

"Calm yourself Lord Hershel." Lily laughed. "I assume these are your children. And your wife." The dragon-queen inclined her head to the woman at Hershel's side.

"Yes, this is my wife Hildi." The woman gave a curtsy, though her eyes were wide and her hands shook slightly on her dress. "I had hoped to make more formal introductions, but your children awoke and simply could not be contained. It seemed like the best way to keep them busy was to give them someone to play with." Hershel was rapidly sliding into the same blank-faced demeanor that John was more familiar with. The dragon felt a pang of sympathy. He could remember being in the same position, having to maintain two faces. The face he could wear at home when he was with his family, and the face he had to wear in public for the sake of appearances.

"I had not considered the implications until just now."

"Implications?" Johnathan could recognize the devilish smirk on his wife's face, even if Hershel did not. She so loved to get a rise out of people.

"Well," Hershel stammered. "I mean, a human, riding a dragon of royal blood."

"I assume Lord Hershel, that you were not created as a fully grown automaton of the court. At some point you were a child, yes?"

Hildi frowned. John could only imagine that she wasn't used to people addressing her husband this way.

"Obviously, yes."

"Did you ever 'consider the implications' when you were a child?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Good. I don't want my children to either. I want them to be children, for as long as I can let them. Besides, if I know Laurelie she was probably the instigator."

The lord and his wife shared a glance, and Hershel visibly relaxed.

"I agree my Lady. I only wish I could let them be children longer. Far too soon my oldest will be a squire, and I have to prepare him." Hershel inclined his head towards a tall lad, maybe ten years old, that was gleefully chasing Ban around the yard, arms outstretched trying to snag the wyrmling's tail. Two young girls followed along behind him, giggling and laughing.

"My son, Eric." Hershel nodded towards the boy. "The youngest, in the blue dress is Rose, and her sister in the green dress is Clara."

They sat in silence, and watched a moment. "They're beautiful children." Lily murmured.

"Thank you. They're a handful, but I love them dearly." Hildi took her husbands arm in hers, clasping hands and offering Lily a timid smile.

"So, did you enjoy The Frostmire?"

"Oh, yes very much so. I appreciate your offer to allow my husband and I to enjoy it privately. It is quite otherworldly."

Not for the first time, John was thankful he couldn't blush.

"Wonderful. You are welcome to visit it at any time during your stay here. Now, Hildi has had the kitchen preparing some lunch for us all; would you care to dine with us? I would like to hear more about your home."

"Of course, let us round up our children and-"

"My Lord! Lord Hershel!" A young man in a Magisters' uniform rushed breathlessly into the courtyard, shouting frantically.

"Lord Hershel, word from the city!"

"They found the circle?"

"No my Lord." The man was pale. "They found a hellmouth."

"Stop for nothing John. Take them back to your home, get mages to begin erecting the gate. Do not leave the children with anyone. Not even your parents." Lily was speaking up at him as Tobias helped buckle in the two children and Andrea. She had not resumed her full size. Lily and Mirabel has already started tracing out the boundaries of a transport spell. It was a risky way to travel, even slight errors in the spell could cause the spell to target the wrong location or even backfire entirely. When Tobias had finished checking the harnesses, he hopped down to assist.

"Queen Lililethan," Hershel was jogging up the hillside towards them. "Surely this isn't necessary. The Magisters have handled situations like this before."

"Lord Hershel, I appreciate your faith in your men, but I am not willing to take that risk. You say you studied you history? Then you know what the response is if this goes any farther." Lily snapped at the human without really looking at him. She was busy using her tail to etch formulas into the ground.

The human blanched. "Surely not. This hasn't progressed that far."

Lily stopped, and fixed him with a stare that stopped him cold. "It was a dead hellmouth. Do you know what it means for demons to willingly kill a hellmouth? It means they don't need it anymore."

Her words hung in the air for a moment. Hershel sighed, "Do you need any men? How many can you transport?"

"I can take two more."

"Leroy and I will accompany you."

"No." Lily said simply. "I will take your cousin, but you must remain. If the worst comes to pass, you and your family will be safe here."

"My Lady-"

"This is not a debate!" Lily's roar reverberated far louder than was natural, ringing in John's ears and causing the children to cower on his back. Snow shook loose from trees in the distance. "There is no time for this! Now stop interrupting me. John, go now. I will meet you back at the estate."

He wanted to argue, tell her to come with him. But he couldn't. He had to trust her. If there was one person in the world that knew how to deal with demons, it was Lililethan.

He leaned down enough to kiss her smaller form between her wings. "Be safe Lily, I need you back."

She offered him a grim smile. "I will. Now go."

The flight back was a miserable blur. John's mind raced over everything that was going wrong, his thoughts frantically flitting from one disaster to the next. Ban and Laurelie were terrified. Andrea was doing her best to comfort them, but she wasn't much better off herself. Lily was throwing herself into danger. They were getting ready to evacuate. Everything was falling apart.

The city came within sight. Lily would already be down there somewhere by now. Or so he hoped. The transport spell she used could be dangerous, there weren't even any guarantees that she had made it through that unscathed. He wondered if his parents were in the city right now.

It wasn't long until he was settling down outside the estate. He was heedless of the flower beds that he crushed as he stepped over the wall, looking for one of Lily's guards.

"Sari!" John recognized one of the captains. "Start getting the gate home ready. We're leaving. Are my parents home?"

"Yes, sir, what's going on?"

"The queen has ordered an evacuation. Could you please get my parents?"

"Right away."

"Dad?" Ban mewled from his back. "Mom's coming back soon right?"

"Of course Ban. She'll be right here. You two need to stay up there though, just in case we need to fly away again. Andrea, could you please stay there with them?" John barely managed to keep his voice steady.

"Yes, of course."

It didn't take but a moment for his mother and father to emerge from the house among the commotion. They hesitated briefly at the bulk of John's frame, but seeing Andrea perched on his back must have given them some courage. "John! What's going on? Why are you trampling my garden?"

"Mom, dad, you need to gather whatever is most valuable to you. We have to leave."

"John," Albert tried to sound stern, "this is highly unusual."

"Dad, they found a hellmouth, there may be more. Lily is in the city right

now trying to get things under control, and I have no idea if she's-" He stopped and swallowed. Anxiety was running away with him. "I'm sorry, this is not what I wanted, but right now you both need to go inside and get anything you need. I am not leaving you here. I will rip the roof off the house and take you with me if I have to."

It turned out, he didn't really need any more motivation than the hellmouth.

There was nothing left for him to do but sit and wait, counting miserable minutes and scanning the sky over the city. So focused on the city, he didn't notice the cloud cover rolling in behind him until the shadow it threw fell over the estate. A roiling turbulent wave of coal dark clouds stretched out over the valley, turning the full noon sun into an unearthly twilight of greens and grays. John felt a chill wash over him. He didn't have much of a weather-sense, but he didn't need it to tell that this unnaturally silent storm was not a good sign. Finally, he caught a flash of green scales over the city, heading towards the estate. Lily arrived like an arrow from a bow, streaking in and flaring her wings at the last moment so that she skidded on her feet before coming to a stop. Maribel and Tobias leapt from her back with practiced ease, even as Lily shrank back down. The trio looked grim.

"Lily?"

"It's time for you to go John. Maribel, help unhook the children."

"Go? You're not coming."

"No, I have to stay." John barely felt Andrea shuffle down his side with the Ban and Laurelie. Lily took the moment of his silence the trigger the gate. With a ripping crash it flashed open, revealing the plaza they had departed from. A full company of soldiers waited on the other side.

"Lily, I can't leave you here." His heart had stopped. He couldn't breath. "You have to come home with us."

She smiled sadly, "John, trust me. I will be all right. I know what's coming, and I've handled it before, but I can't have you here. I need you and the

children safe so that I can concentrate."

He drew in a shuddering breath, "You swear?"

She approached close enough to lay her head against his chest, dwarfed currently by his size. "I swear John. Nothing in this world or theirs will keep me from you. Now you'd better get your spell going; you're not going to fit through the gate like that. Ban, Laurelie, come with me. I'll take you over, but I have to come right back." John watched her escort their children with a lump in his throat.

Most of the entourage that Lily had brought was still scattered around the valley. The artists and scholars that had come here had departed under the expectation of more time. The evacuation would leave many behind. Those that were here filtered through the gate quickly. Andrea gave John a torn look, and then let herself be guided through with their parents. It was just Lily's retinue of mages left, staying behind to assist their queen.

"Mom! No, mom! Come with us!" He could hear his children pleading with their mother, begging her to come home with them. They might not know what was going on, but they could feel the tension and fear of those around them. He couldn't listen, he began trying to concentrate on the spell so that he could go home, and leave his wife here. The thought made him feel ill.

It happened in slow motion. Lily passed through the gate with the children, shushing them and trying to assure them that everything would be fine. One of the mages on John's side of the portal turned, and placed the end of his spear on the copper frame of the gate. John felt the power of the spell discharge, but it was too late to do anything. The copper split with an explosive crack. The shimmering gateway flickered, Lily turned to look at him, her eyes wide in terror.

"Johnathan!" Her anguished roar was the last thing to make it through the gate before it blinked out with a flash. The escape route was gone, and Lily was on the other side of it.

John was still in shock as the mage turned to point his spear at the only dragon left. A moment later it clattered to the ground as Maribel's sword severed his arm at the bicep. The saboteur looked numbly at the stump and began laughing as brackish ichor poured from the wound. "We're coming for you changeling! We found you, and we will have you!" The man screeched the words out hysterically for a moment, before collapsing like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Possessed." Maribel spat. As if the word was an order, the rest of the mages present drew a small blade and pricked their forearms. Maribel did the same, and then circled the group, checking all the wounds.

"Should I?" John asked uncertainly, holding a talon up to his forearm.

"Dragons can't be possessed John." Maribel said dismissively, checking the last mage.

"Oh."

"You need to leave." She started wrapping her wound.

"What? Where?"

"I don't want to know. Just fly as far away as you can. Lily will find you."

"I can't just leave you all here."

"Did you not just hear that thing?" Tobias growled. "They're here for you."

"And if I'm not here they'll leave? Will they follow me?"

"No. They only know you're here. They can't track you. They'll probably go to the city."

John looked down over Pastock. The city gates were closed, signal flags were going up on the palace. The storm overhead must have alerted them.

"Can you stop them?"

"John, none of these questions is helping you leave."

"You can't." He stated flatly. Maribel's glare only confirmed it.

"It does. Not. Matter. You won't be able to stop it either. If you stay and fight, the only thing that will change is that you may die. Or worse."

John swallowed. He had promised Lily. He had sworn that he wouldn't do anything to risk himself. But there was a whole city full of people down there.

"Maribel, there are tens of thousands of people in that city. Thousands of children. How can I ever look at my son and daughter again if I just leave them all to die?"

"Damn it all you stupid, stubborn lizard." John could hear her swearing under her breath. "Look, I can't *make* you leave, but if you're staying, you stay in the air. You stay out of reach. Use spells, or drop shit on their heads, but you stay safe."

Whatever advantages he might have as a dragon, Maribel had trained for this; he would follow her orders.

"Understood."

"All right. If you have any gods, you might want to pray to them now."

Price of Bravery

Forty passengers was a heavy load, even for a dragon of John's size. He hardly noticed the burden though, as his family's estate dropped away below them into the overcast gloom. They were abandoning the farm in favor of the defenses and walls of Pastock. Maribel had been reluctant to return the the city; there were surely more possessed citizens there waiting for a chance to strike. Perhaps even more summoning circles. They didn't really have a choice though. Whatever dangers the city held, it had to be safer than trying to defend a farmhouse. John spared one last glance down at his childhood home, wondering if he'd get the chance to see it again.

The unnatural storm above them had only grown denser, blocking out the sun so thoroughly that it was nearly as dark as night over the valley. Angry flashes of red and yellow lightning lit the bellies of the clouds, but no sound reached them. The city was lit up with lamps and lanterns; thousands of little bobbing lights filled the streets, carried by the populace as they fled the outermost district, seeking shelter behind deeper rings of the concentric walls.

The flight wasn't particularly long. They covered the two miles between the estate and the city in just a couple of minutes. John only hoped they didn't mistake him for a demon and fire the cannons on him in a blind panic. He breathed a sigh of relief as they landed unharmed in the clear avenue behind the nearest gate. As Maribel and the rest of Lily's cadre of battle-mages leapt down from his back they formed a protective circle, ensuring that no one and nothing could get too close to the dragon. Anyone here could be an assassin or saboteur.

"Consort!" Leroy's voice pierced the darkness. The knight was up atop the gatehouse, shouting down at them. He disappeared out of sight, but John could hear his armor clattering noisily as the man descended through the structure. Several of the mages closed ranks, ensuring a safe distance between Leroy and John as the man emerged out onto the street. "Consort, where is your queen?"

Maribel shared a quick glance with the dragon before approaching the knight. "Sir Leroy, would you be so kind as to draw some blood for us?"

Leroy rolled back his sleeve, revealing a shallow cut that still oozed a slight trickle of normal, red blood. "We've already had reports of possessed

civilians all over the city attacking guards and trying to open the gates. It's a madhouse here."

Maribel nodded. "We had only had one, but it was enough. They destroyed our gate home, with the queen on the other side."

The knight's face drew taught and bleak. "Well, I suppose it is good she didn't bring Lord Hershel. At least one of the noble houses here may survive. The Magisters are fairly certain the demons are going to open a rift."

"Queen Lililethan thought as much, but don't count us out yet. John here might not be very well practiced in exterminating demons, but he is a dragon. It tends to come naturally to them. We need access to an armory. Grenades, spears, anything he can drop from the air."

John observed silently as Maribel and Leroy began to sketch out a rough plan. Tobias and a handful of the other mages would arrange a landing zone for John near the closest armory. Their task would be to protect the dragon as he re-armed for more bombing runs. Maribel and the rest of the mages would split up into even groups, heading to each of the three main gates of the city to reinforce the soldiers and magisters already there. They couldn't tell yet which direction the attack would come from, but once it began they could all converge on whichever section of the wall was hardest hit.

"Good luck Consort. Maribel." The knight spared a tight smile for the woman, "If fate is generous, we'll share a toast when this is over."

Once he'd departed, Maribel turned to face the rest of the mages. "Everyone watch your backs. Make sure you check the guards around you, and don't get captured!" She added vehemently. "Every person they can drag back through the rift alive keeps it open a little longer. You fight to the death. That includes you John."

He nodded grimly.

Leroy had already sent a runner to the armory. When John arrived the soldiers there were carrying loads of ordnance out into the street, stacking it up for him. He was glad he hadn't gotten a chance to take off his passenger harness as it gave them something to strap the payload onto. Tobias and his crew didn't waste any time in loading him up with crates of grenades. "Remember, just drop the shit and run. Don't waste time trying to be accurate. If we live long enough to go through everything here we'll find another armory."

"Got it." John grunted as one of the mage cinched down another crate.

"Bet you didn't think a family vacation could get this exciting, eh?" The

mage wore a feral smile on his face, but any reply the dragon might have made was interrupted by a rumbling tremor in the ground under their feet. John heard glass breaking and masonry grinding as the earth trembled. "Sounds like your queue. Go give em hell."

The pervasive, vile wrongness that John had felt at the banquet washed over him. Once again it triggered a cascade of irrational hatred and violence in the dragon. Something was here that did not belong, and he was going to kill it. He exploded into the air, his jaws opening to unleash a reverberating roar that shuddered through the air, the echo hanging over the city for many long moments. He rose up above the walls, and saw the source of the quakes.

A pit was forming out in the fields and pastures beyond the wall. Great sections of the valley floor crumbled and disappeared into the widening sinkhole, and a hellish red glow emanated from its depths. Wider and wider the rift grew, two hundred yards, three hundred, four hundred. And then something began to emerge. The memories of his demonic nightmares had been dampened and fractured, but he recognized the carnal mass that began to billow from the depths of the earth.

Like a cyst the size of the mountain, rotten gangrenous flesh pulsed and twitched as it entered their world. Every square foot of its surface was crawling with scurrying forms. Thousands of demons. The thing was too big to pass through entirely though. It caught on the edge of the pit, the surface of the obscene hill stretched under the tension, and then split at the top. A colossal fountain of gore shot into the air, blanketing the area around the pit in a sea of steaming blood. The overwhelming stench of bile and decay quickly reached him in his flight.

The invaders flowed towards the city in a tide. Their forms were as varied as they were monstrous. Familiar elements of animals were present in their construction, but combined in impossible and sickening ways. Things with far too many limbs and joints, or far too few. A creature that had the shape of a dog, but was covered in chitinous plates and scurried along on five ape-like arms. A humanoid figure, but twenty feet tall and bloated, it's skin all made up of overlapping rolls and bubbles of fat. Homes and farms were overrun as the horde approached, stoking the dragon's fury as he watched the valley of his home desecrated.

His hands were shaking in uncontrolled anger as he ripped one of the crates from his harness and hurled it at the front line of the advancing host.

He ignited it with a gout of flame as he threw, so that the wooden box sailed through the air like a comet spilling its payload. He didn't wait for it to hit as he readied another. The first crate had already gotten the demon's attention however, and they had come prepared to fight a dragon. A sudden forest of projectiles was launched up to meet him in the air from various demons on the ground. Enormous spines of barbed bone, giant boulders of scabrous meat, and high pressure sprays of acidic vomit forced the dragon to take evasive maneuvers. For a moment he tried to rise into the clouds for cover. That idea was stopped when giant arcs of lightning danced down towards him, trapping him between the clouds and the demons below. With a flicker of magic he activated the protective enchantments on his silk gown.

The clothing had never been purely for aesthetic purposes. Green silk rippled and flowed over him instantaneously, pressing tight against him like a second skin. The enchantments swapped physical properties of the silk with prepared materials; the cloth became stronger than steel, though it continued to flex with his movements. A perfect set of armor, just in time.

Spears of bone shattered and splintered against the armor with enough force to bruise the scales underneath. Splashes of acid and poison sizzled against the fabric, the fumes burning in the dragon's throat and eyes. He focused on letting his magic flow out, repairing the armor as it was damaged. When he found gaps in the barrage, he hurled away the rest of his cargo before wheeling back towards the city. A rolling wave of flashes from the walls was followed a moment later by the echoing boom of cannon-fire. The guns of Pastock opened fire on the horde, giving the dragon a brief moment to breath and look back to see what damage had been done to the army of monsters. To his great dismay, there didn't appear to be any.

Tobias and his fellow mages were waiting for him as he landed. Two of the mages assisted John with in trying to repair the damage to his armor, their combined spells mending the silk and purging it of the acids and poisons that ate away at the enchanted fabric. The rest loaded him up with more bombs. Without a word exchanged, John took flight again. The cannons had created gaps for him, and he was able to better aim his bombs this time. He honed in on the tighter clusters of demons, or anything that seemed large enough to breach the gates. A direct hit on one shambling, elephantine creature

apparently ruptured something inside of it, and it exploded into an enormous spray of corrosive blood. Demons around it began disintegrating in the mist, their screams lost in the din of battle.

Detonations from the city drew his attention. The demons had arrived at the walls, triggering traps left by the Magisters and Lily's people. Wild bursts of energy lit of the scene as barely contained spells exploded into tornadoes of fire and shrapnel, cutting down swathes of demons. But not enough. These creatures didn't need ladders to climb, and soon the cannons on the outer wall fell silent as the crews were forced to defend themselves in melee.

A piercing pain brought him back into the present. One of the spines had made it the silk, lodging in the scales of his shoulder. The foul poison coating the shaft sizzled on his hide and foamed in the trickle of blood from the wound. John blasted a gout of fire at the shaft, burning away the poison before tearing it out of his flesh. His armor was beginning to fray. By the time he had made it back behind the walls, several more spikes had made it through. Blood trickled to the cobblestones as he landed. The mages had to spend time closing the wounds, trying to stop the spread of the caustic poisons. It took longer to re-arm.

Over and over John made the loop back to the armory, loading up on kegs of black powder or bundles of spears once they'd exhausted all the grenades. It must have been his tenth bombing run, or maybe his twelfth. His mind was beginning to fog with fatigue, the blood-lust barely enough to override the need to rest. He descended towards the armory once more but paused involuntarily, hovering in the air. Something tickled the back of his mind; a sense of danger that didn't seem to have a source. It took a moment for his conscious mind to recognize what was wrong. The mages weren't moving or holding weapons ready for him. They stood stock still, waiting and watching him in the air. Tobias was missing and there was a sharp smell of blood over the area. Not the pervasive smell of demonic ichor, but sharp, coppery human blood. The possessed mages below must have noticed his hesitation. He felt the building energy of a half dozen different spells.

With an anguished roar John exhaled a wave of fire. The stacks of ordnance ignited, and human forms began to slump over and fall in the

flames, but the screams that reached him were not screams of pain.

"Changeling! Get the Changeling!"

He soared back into the sky, his heart thumping in anger and guilt. A moment later the gathered bombs exploded. The blast demolished the armory and the buildings around it, turning the street into a fiery hellstorm. He fought back a rising panic: their plan had failed. In the gloom and clamor of battle, he couldn't get a sense of direction. He didn't know where the next armory was, and even if he did he had no one left to help arm him. A crash in the distance drew his attention. The demons had breached a gate. John hurried to the scene, but by the time he got there the soldiers were retreating, unable to stop the wave of grotesque attackers from pouring through.

Atop the gatehouse he spied Maribel, Leroy, and handful of of soldiers circled back to back, fighting desperately to repel the demons that had surmounted the wall. Dozens of captured humans were being passed back through the demons towards the gate, fodder for the rift. He dove, and poured flame into the open gate. Men and demons screamed together as they were incinerated.

The battle disappeared into a haze. With nothing left to use as bombs, John's entire existence consisted of fire. He would find a gap in the defenses, descend, and unleash an inferno down into it. His flames consumed everything indiscriminately. Demons, and anyone they captured burned to ash beneath him. Sections of the wall glowed and sagged under his assault. The dragon flew and rained fire down until his wings were seizing up and his throat was raw and bleeding. Finally, he rose to find another target and realized there were none. Towers of fire and smoke burned all around him. The conflagration lit up the unnatural night, reflecting off of the clouds and casting the whole city in an orange light. The ground trembled again as the rift began to close.

He practically crashed to the ground outside of the gatehouse where they'd first arrived. His legs shook with fatigue, and he nearly collapsed. Only sharp stabbing pains in his belly stopped him. Glancing down, he saw that he had quills of bone jutting out from his stomach and chest, the scales burned away

in patches around them.

"John?" Maribel's voice startled him. She approached through the dim smoky haze, holding a sword in her right hand while supporting Leroy with her left. Her scalp was split along the side of her head, one ear torn off. The knight hobbled along on one leg, the other dangling from a few chunks of flesh. A tourniquet was clamped down above the wound, preventing him from bleeding out.

"Hi." John managed to croak the word out, even as it felt like the single syllable would tear his throat.

Maribel lowered the insensate knight down against a wall and sheathed her sword. Considering the blood still dripping down her face, John didn't feel the need to make sure she wasn't possessed as she moved under him and wrapped her hand around one of the quills. He felt curiously numb as she pulled it free. One by one she pulled them out and tossed them aside. "Looks like we made it."

"Tobias is gone." He mumbled.

She grunted and yanked another quill loose. He sat and watched the fires as she removed the spears from his underside. Tears streaked through the blood and soot on his face. He didn't even know why he was weeping, he didn't even feel sad. Just so very tired. He watched the mountain of flesh begin to sink back into the pit over a collapsed section of the wall. Scarcely believing that it was over. Then the surface of it began to squirm and writhe like it was filled with snakes. Another eruption of blood spewed from the sac as it ripped open, and something began to claw its way out.

"No, there's no way." Maribel breathed.

An impossibly long form wriggled free. It was so big that John had to try and make sense of it in sections. The head of the creature was dominated by a circular maw large enough to swallow him whole. The same hellish light of the pit glowed from inside the mouth, highlighting the many of rows of teeth that lined the inside. Four enormous scythe-like mandibles clacked together

with the sound of a bear trap, each one large enough to cut John in half. Hundreds of spider-like legs sprouted from its body in all directions, scrabbling at the edge of the pit at it worked its way free. The back end of the thing was a mirror image of the front so that he couldn't tell which was which until the thing started moving, bearing down on the city.

The battle-mage watched silently. Her blood-covered face was resigned, not fearful. "Leviathan."

John had read enough about demons to know the lore behind the word. A living gateway to hell. Anything it swallowed would be drawn back into their world, and for every soul it devoured, it could disgorge another demon from its other end.

"John, there's nothing more you can do. Get out of here."

The thought was tempting. He was so tired, and every part of him hurt. But he couldn't leave this city to the leviathan. Pastock wasn't his home anymore, but it had been once. Tens of thousands sheltered in the city, defenseless against the threat that descended upon them. He couldn't just abandon them to the demons; not when he knew the fate that awaited them.

Cannon-fire rung out again. The guns of Pastock were firing on the demon. Holes the size of houses ripped into the monster's flesh. Barely pin picks to it. With a startling swiftness it advanced on the city.

John had nothing left. His weapons were gone and he was on the last dregs of his strength. Even fully armed and rested he had nothing potent enough to harm this beast. They would need something enormous. Maybe if they lured it to the palace and detonated the powder magazine or-

A mine explosion. When he was younger one of the mines at the far end of the valley had breached a pocket of gas. The explosion left a crater large enough to form a new lake.

"If I don't make it back, tell Lily I'm sorry." He spat up some blood as he hacked out the words, spreading his wings. The leviathan stopped, its body

turning to follow the dragon.

"What? No, get out of here!" She screamed at him as he rose into the sky, heading east. He drew energy from the fires he had started, pouring it into his wings, forcing them to move faster than his body could manage. He needed to create a gap, lure it away from the city. A blood-curdling screech set his teeth on edge, almost interrupting his spell. The leviathan was following him, moving far too quickly. He let his senses expand with his spells, seeping into the ground and probing the depths of the valley floor.

He had never been particularly good at scrying, but fortunately what he sought out wasn't small or subtle, just buried. There were no guarantees that he could find another bubble of gas, or if it would be close enough to the surface to use, but he had no other ideas and he needed to get the leviathan away from the city. Otherwise they'd have another army of demons on their hands. The sound of the cannons faded into the distance as he flew. Pain lanced through his wings and across his chest now. The blood-lust of battle had left him, leaving only a sickening weariness. On and on he flew. The end of the valley now in sight, and the leviathan still far too close for comfort.

Hopelessness was beginning to take hold. He was running out of space and he didn't think he could outrun this thing anymore. He couldn't let himself be captured alive. Just as he began to try and work up the courage to do what he knew was necessary, he felt something. A hollow chamber, close to the surface. A plume of gas that was part of a much larger reservoir below. He fixed his eyes on the spot and let go of his scrying as he dove down on his target, focusing a new spell. He channeled the inertia of his fall, honing it into a spear. At the very last second he flared his wings, bringing his legs forward to catch himself. His wings held a moment, and then folded, too weak to stop his dive.

John crashed into the ground with crushing force. Bones snapped in his left leg, tearing a scream of pain from his throat, but the impact had released the spell. A spear of focused kinetic energy pierced the earth. The ground around him cracked and splintered as the integrity of the rock failed, and the earth began to sink below him. Roaring in agony, he forced his wings to work again. The leviathan was nearly on top of him. His leg throbbed with every

heartbeat. He could feel blood trickling off his foot from the compound fracture, but he didn't have time to look; the sound of those clacking mandibles was far too loud in his ears.

The creature reached the spot where John had laid his trap. Its weight landed on the fractured earth, and the earth gave. The leviathan stumbled to a halt as the front of its body fell into the pit, and it screamed in fury again. John turned and spat a wad of flame barely bigger than a campfire, but all he needed was one spark. Gas had filtered up to the surface, and the entire pit erupted into one great jet of fire as the gas burned down towards its source. The creature writhed as the flames tore into it. A moment later the flame reached the reservoir, and the world exploded.

Suffocating pain smothered him, blocking out everything else. He couldn't see, couldn't breath, all he knew was torment in every inch of his body. He screamed and begged for death.

"Stay with me John," He didn't recognize the voice, he didn't even recognize the name. "I'm not going to let you go, I've got you." Something familiar itched at his mind, the feeling of reality being tweaked and altered. His pain eased a fraction, then a fraction more. "I've got you love." The pain faded into a comforting darkness. He slept.

It was with some surprise that John jerked awake. His body felt oddly numb and unresponsive. For a moment his mind reeled, still remembering the fight, before he realized that he must have been moved. He was laying on his back in a bed of luxuriously soft cushions, his wings and limbs bound up tightly in cloth. His eyes were covered, and something was wrapped around his snout, binding his mouth closed. A warm weight was draped along the length of him; there was a dragon laying atop him. Smaller than him, lighter, with wings spread over him in a blanket, their tail coiled with his. It only took a moment for him to recognize their soft breathing: Lily.

He exhaled in deep relief, reaching up to embrace her. Or trying to anyhow. A jolt of pain made him grunt as every joint and muscle protested to

being moved. Lily stirred at the sound, shifting atop him. A hand touched his chest, and a moment she pressed her cheek to his, her lips kissing his ear.

"You promised Johnathan." Hot tears splashed against his scales. "You promised me you wouldn't risk yourself."

He wanted to speak, to apologize, but he couldn't. Even attempting to open his mouth sent bolts of pain harsh enough to make him dizzy. Lily brought her hand from his chest to his face, brushing over the bandages there. "I know why you stayed. You are a good person. And I know that I can't hold you to that promise. If you were actually able to keep it, you wouldn't be the dragon that I married. But I need my husband. I need you to promise me again. Even if we both know you can't keep it."

His heart burned to hold her, to see her face and kiss those tears away. He managed a nod. Lily was apparently satisfied with that, and went quiet as she held him, still weeping silently. He had so many questions. Where were the children? Was his family safe? Where was he? He whimpered in frustration, trying to force some sound from his lips.

"Bnn, Lrrrrrl?" His children's names came out more as an animal growl than anything else.

"They're here love. I haven't let them in to see you yet. You were-" Her voice broke. "You are terribly injured John. It will take a long while to recover. The healers aren't sure how long, but you're safe here."

"Hrrr?"

"Syrsarun. Capitol of the Supreme Confederation of The Sovereign Elders." She snapped out the excessively long title in a voice dripping with scorn. "It's the last place I want to spend time, but there are no better healers in the world, and even demons are afraid to enter here."

If anything, the statement only added more questions to John's list. Lily had spoken only very rarely of her old home, and had told him explicitly that she did not think much of returning. So many things he wanted to ask. He

grumbled in annoyance, but approaching footsteps stopped further conversation. It was a dragon, four footfalls, claws clicking slightly on stone floors. The newcomer approached to within a few feet before speaking in a rapid-fire language that John didn't recognize. It seemed to be all consonants and flowing sibilant sounds.

"She's going to change the bandages on your face John, don't open your mouth. Your lower jaw was completely shattered and needs to be kept still." Her statement stunned him. He didn't remember being this injured. He tried to remember the battle. He'd taken some spines, and some burns from the poison. Broken his leg when he'd vented the gas, and there was the explosion...

Ah. The explosion. A new touch on his face banished the thought as the healer began unwinding layers of bandages. The cloth seemed to stick together in places, and the smell of dried blood filled his nose.

"She's going to spray the bandages John, keep still." Lily's voice was still soft in his ear. A moment later there was a mist of water landing on his face. It soaked into the bandages; the metallic bite of blood grew stronger in the air. The last layer of bandages stung as it was pulled away from his face. Lily caught her breath and he felt her turn away. Was he that bad off? The healer chattered away again for a moment, and he heard bottles clinking.

"The scales are starting to grow in. There will be scarring and discoloration. It should fade in time." She sounded sick. Heavens how he wanted to touch her, to offer some comfort. "She's going to give you some medicine, before your pain starts coming back. It will make you sleep, but I will stay with you."

He nodded again. A moment later a small pipe touched his lips and squeezed between them. The healer squirted a foul tasting concoction into his mouth. The bitter, acrid fluid flowed down the back of his throat, making him want to gag. He tried to use his tongue to clear it out of his mouth as much as possible, and noticed for the first time that most of his teeth seemed to be missing. A moment later the same pipe began to dribble water into his mouth. He swallowed it gratefully. The healer misted him again with an astringent,

stinging liquid, and began wrapping him back up. By the time she finished, he already felt the chemical lethargy taking hold of him. "Sleep, I'll be here when you wake up."

Time passed strangely for John as he recovered. Short bits of wakefulness separated by long periods of sleep. The only thing that helped him keep track of time was the extremely orderly structure of his care. Every single day the healer arrived at exactly the same time to check his bandages. Food was delivered at exactly the same times every day, and he was dosed with pain killers exactly every four hours. The only thing that wasn't ordered was Lily's presence in his room.

Lily couldn't stay with him all the time. She had to care for the children as well. Maribel was here though, and tried to keep John company when Lily couldn't. She didn't say much her first few visits, but over time began to give him an account of the aftermath of the battle. Only a handful of Lily's mages had made it through. Tobias had died in the fighting. Sari as well. Falthwain's cousin Leroy had lost his leg after all. Geofrey and the majority of the Magisters had died trying hold a gate early in the fight. They were still finding bodies in the city. The possessed were still causing problems, striking randomly as their hosts' bodies failed. Pastock was just about evenly split between people who were hailing him as a hero, and people who blamed the dragons for the whole thing.

Eventually Maribel relayed the story of finding him after the explosion. Her descriptions were broken and vague, but they were enough to give him an idea of the extent of his injuries. He could understand why Lily hadn't told him, or let the children in to see him. The explosion that had killed the leviathan had broken him as well. He had only been saved by two dragons that had flown in from the east. Presumably the two that Falthwain had spoken of meeting. They had thought John dead, and were trying to save his remains from the crater when he coughed up blood on them both. They had managed to stabilize him long enough for Lily to find her way back. That had been three months ago. John had been kept in a coma since then as the healers worked to piece his body back together.

As the days passed he began to gain strength and mobility. More and more

bandages came off. First, around his tail where they had re-attached the lower third, and then his ribs from the poisoned quills. They removed the bandages around his snout, but to John's dismay, while could open his mouth most of the way, he could not speak. He had crushed his larynx when he had been blasted from the sky. The healers assured him his voice would return, his eyesight as well, but he had to be patient. Finally the day arrived when Lily brought the children to see him. They were subdued at first, afraid to touch him or speak too loud, but when Lily had mentioned offhandedly that he looked cold, Ban and Laurelie eagerly cuddled up to his chest to keep him warm. Soon the four of them were snuggled into a group, and John found that if he leaned in close enough he could whisper to his wife and children, using his breath to form the sounds. The youngsters quickly made a game of it, whispering back as they regaled John with all the adventures they'd had since arriving in the capitol. They were extremely excited to be around so many other dragons. He wished dearly that he could see them, but the sound of their voices was enough to sooth him.

When his wings were unwrapped and John could stand on his three good legs, the healers decided it would be good for him to get some sun. Lily supported him out of his quiet room, leading him through the large structure. He could hear other dragons in the halls, but Lily managed to avoid actually meeting any. His legs were starting to get weak when they finally emerged into warm sunlight. They stepped out onto sand, soft and warm under his feet. With a blessed sigh he settled down into the pit of sand, rolling onto his back and spreading out his wings, so that he was warmed from above and below.

"You know, that's supposed to have enough room for both of us." Lily laughed as he wriggled deeper into the sand.

John grinned back at her sheepishly, but before he could move she was sliding on top of him, laying against him once more. "That's all right, I am comfortable with this."

He could only purr his agreement. At least that was one sound he could still make. John lay soaking in the heat of his love and the sun together, listening to the world around them. He could smell the sea and abundant

vegetation. They must be somewhere up high as he could hear the hustle and bustle of the city below them. Occasionally the thumping beats of dragon wings would pass overhead or below them, although no one landed to disturb them. He wondered when they would see fit to take the bandages off his eyes. He would love to see this place, even if Lily couldn't wait to leave. His wife's movements interrupted his thoughts. She sat up, so that she was almost squatting on his stomach. A moment later she gripped his wrist, guiding his hand up to rest on her belly and leaving it there.

He tilted his head quizzically.

"John," Her musical laugh made him smile, even in his confusion. "Surely even you aren't that thick." She pressed her hand over his meaningfully, breathing in deeply so that her belly swelled.

"Oh!" He could only breath the word.

She laughed again as he took her hands in his and pulled her down to kiss him. She giggled into his lips, her tongue running over his recently grown teeth. "I don't know if we'll have twins again yet, but with as hard as we were trying I wouldn't be surprised." Her tears of joy splashed down on his face.

John enveloped her with his wings, rocking his wife against his chest. And then, like a switch had been flipped, she was shaking in his arms, her body wracked with sobs. It had been a long time coming he expected. Aside from that first day of waking up, Lily hadn't shed a tear. She'd maintained a cheerful face for the children for weeks now, never giving a hint of grief or fear. Now she let it all out, crying into the scales of his chest.

"I almost lost you, and I can't get it out of my head. I can't stop thinking about having to raise our children without you, and every time I close my eyes I see you laying there in pieces."

He clenched his jaw and squeezed her tighter, ignoring the protests of his aching limbs. He didn't have any words that could make this better, even if he could speak them. He held her in silence as she wept, until her shaking stopped and her breathing evened out into sleep. The sun grew warmer as it

moved across the sky, the morning transitioning into noon. At one point he heard another dragon approach them. From the rattling and clinking they were pushing a cart. The smell of food filled the air as the dragon, a healer John would presume, left the cart without a word. Lily didn't stir. It wasn't until Johnathan's stomach was growling with hunger and his throat parched that she finally moved in his arms.

"Mmmm," She hummed, stretching against him. A moment later she grew still, "My word, what time is it?"

John shrugged his wings.

"You should have woken me!" She pushed on his wings until he let them fall away so she could reach out and pull the food cart closer to them. "Here, lift your head."

She touched a bowl to his lips, allowing him to whet his thirst. When he had drank his fill, she replaced the bowl with her lips, kissing him tenderly. "Thank you though, that was very sweet. I haven't slept that well in weeks now."

John let Lily feed him from the cart as he relaxed in the sand. The food here had taken some getting used to. Nearly everything was cooked with chilies or soaked in a spicy brine. Even the melons on the cart had been dusted with a spicy powder. She fed him until he waved her off, stuffed to the brim. Lily settled down atop him with a sigh.

"We're going to figure this out John. I don't know why the demons seem to be interested in you, but I am not letting them destroy our plans. I've sent them screaming back to hell before, and I'll do it again." He squeezed her reassuringly.

She responded by smiling and kissing his chest. "We're going to have another child. No, two more children." She kissed him again, higher on his throat.

"We're going to teach Ban and Laurelie how to fly." Another pause for a

kiss just a little higher on his neck. "We're going to move into our new home, with *separate* rooms for all the kids, and we're going to raise our beautiful family." She finished with a kiss on his cheek, her tongue flicking over his scales. "How does that sound?"

He grinned and rubbed his nose against hers, nibbling at her scales.

"Mmm-hmm, that's what I thought." She kissed him, deeply now. He wished he could see her eyes, he loved how her eyes looked when she smiled. Instead he brought both hands up to her cheeks, returning the kiss with fiery enthusiasm.

She shivered atop him as she broke away panting. "Better slow down, I doubt the healers would condone this particular form of treatment."

John put his lips right up to her twitching ear so that she could hear his whisper, "What they don't know won't hurt them."

She growled, "Are you sure? I don't want to do anything reckless."

"Be gentle."

She nodded, and slowly pressed him back down into the sand, her hands on his chest as she straddled his waist. Her fingers curled against his scales, lightly scratching as she began to rock her hips against him in short soft motions. He couldn't sit up enough to put his hands on her hips, so he rested them on her thighs, his fingers dancing in small circles. It occurred to John that he had no idea if anyone could see him. With bandages still wrapped around his eyes the world was limited to what he could hear, smell, and touch. He could hear Lily's soft panting gasps as she ground her sex against his slit. He could smell her arousal building in the air, and he could feel her part deliciously around him as his maleness slipped free, burying itself in the inviting embrace of her soft folds. He quickly stopped caring if they were in the open.

She didn't stop until he was fully erect. It was only when he felt his crown bottom out inside of her that she slowed down, focusing less on the

movement of her hips and more on using the muscles in her belly to massage him within her depths. John's mouth fell open as her passage rippled around his shaft, milking him. The rolling contractions teased against the whole length of him, one after another. She shivered atop him, but remained still, just reveling in having him inside of her. Wild experimentation and Lily's kinky ideas were fun, but this type of slow, delicate lovemaking still set John's heart fluttering. He shifted his hands to her hers where they rested on his chest, lacing his fingers with hers as she began to gyrate against him once more. Every soft bounce of her rump in his lap brought another panting breath from her maw as her thighs flexed and squeezed against him.

"Mmm, this is nice." She purred, echoing his thoughts. "It's a shame you can't see." There was mischief in her voice now. "Does it remind you of anything?"

John grinned and squeezed her hands as he remembered their first night together. He knew Lily's body by memory now, but he would always cherish that night of exploring it clumsily in the dark for the first time. She hunched over him, still resting with her hands in his chest, but now her nose was inches from his.

"Would you like me to describe it for you? I could tell you how lewd it looks, your cock splitting me open like this." She huffed the words into his face, her breath hot and fast. "C-c-could t-tell you how I'm dripping onto your bellyyyyy." He teasing tone of voice evaporated into a stammering squeal as he lifted his hips up into her, brushing the back of her passage and the entrance to her womb. He was on edge. He could feel his crown swelling, ready to lock her in place and ensure every drop stayed inside.

"Oh! John, love!" She leaned in those last few inches and kissed him as their slow passion paid off in a mutual peak. He pushed against her, shoving that last little length inside, so that he flared out against that barrier inside of her. She moaned and trembled with her own orgasm. Her toes scrabbled against his hips as she tried to grip him. He felt the pressure against his flare as he pumped pulse after pulse of seed into her belly. It built up too fast, oozing around the flare and dripping back down onto his scales. With a satisfied sigh she collapsed against his chest. She licked his neck and rubbed

herself against him until he was finally spent, still tied to her by his flare.

John purred his pleasure out to her again, hugging her to his chest once more to bask in her heat.

"I will never, in my life, get tired of that." She murmured happily her fingers caressing over his scales again. "I love you Johnathan. Every stubborn, bull-headed inch of you. Especially these inches." She wiggled her hips so that the spines of his flare dragged on her flesh. He would get his voice back eventually. But until he did, he settled for gently rocking her again, until she drifted back into her nap, still tied at the hips.

John's voice came back before his sight did. It was weak and scratchy at first, but over the course of a few days began to resemble his old sonorous, resonant tones. It wasn't long after that the healers deemed fit to begin to remove the bandages on his eyes. They had to come off in stages: he had spent so long with them on that he couldn't just take them off all at once. Every day, the healers would remove another layer, letting just a little bit more light filter through, until finally he was able once again see the world around him. The female healer that had been caring for him the majority of the time was his first sight. The milk-white dragoness smiled at up him, chattering away in the local language. She was much smaller than he expected, not even half his size. For the first time in four months he laid eyes on his wife's smiling face, and his squirming, excited children.

And, for the first time in four months he got to see himself in a mirror. Jagged lines of grayish, scarred scales crisscrossed his face. A web of them on his snout, up over his eyes. His ear was torn and notched where the studs had been. More lines of scars ran down the webs of his wings where the flesh had been stitched together to mend. The edges were uneven, although the worst notches were already healing and rounding out. Nearly his entire front was mismatched, the scales there a pattern of different shades of mottled red and gray. Knots of scar tissue dotted his chest and belly. A ring of it ran around his tail, two-thirds down. He swallowed.

"I look pretty decent, all things considered."

"You look awesome!" Ban shouted excitedly, leaping up to bound off of John's shoulder. All four dragons were at their natural sizes, and it was obvious the children had grown these last months. Laurelie's fuzzy red tiger stripes had finally crystallized into bold teardrop shaped slashes. Ban's growth was speeding up. He was noticeably larger than Laurelie now, and his horns were beginning to bud at the back of his head. "You look like you can fight a whole army!"

Laurelie nimbly scampered up his tail, walking carefully along his spine until she could touch the scars on his neck. "Do they hurt dad?"

"No dear one, they don't hurt."

"That's good." She patted the scar as if thanking it. He smiled and turned away from the mirror, facing his wife and Maribel.

"I think you look very dashing, love." Lily smiled indulgently. "But let's make this the maximum number of scars please."

"I think you look like you got in a fight with a meat grinder." Maribel chuckled.

John raised an eyebrow at her hypocrisy.

She winced and raised one hand to her ear. Her dark skin was marred by pale lines of scar tissue across the side of her head. They had managed to repair her ear, mostly. The hair had only just grown back over the wound, leaving her haircut somewhat lopsided. "Yeah yeah, at least they didn't have to sew parts of me back on."

John got a good look at his room for the first time. It was palatial, to say the least. The center of the circular room had a depression full of bedding large enough for a full size dragon. Racks of medicine and dragon-sized tools lined the walls. An archway bigger than a castle gate led out into the hall. Stone columns supported a domed ceiling. There were no windows, but every inch of the walls and the ceiling were painted in vibrant murals. At the top of

the dome, a glowing orb hung, casting the room in cheerful warm light. It was too bad most of that had been wasted on him the last few months, but it was beautiful nevertheless.

"So, what now?" He asked, unsure if he'd been declared fit to leave.

Lily looked almost reluctant to answer. "First, we're going to send the children back home with Maribel. They'll stay with your family for now. We are going back to Pastock. We need to see if we can find out who was working with the demons there and why."

John swallowed, but nodded. He wasn't exactly keen to return, but Lily was right. If he was being targeted, they needed to find out why.

"No!" Laurelie's squeak from atop his back stopped him, and a moment later his daughter was wrapping herself around his neck, clinging to him desperately. "Don't leave again." She whimpered. Ban wasn't about to let him go either. His son was suddenly latched onto one of his wrists, clinging to the patchy, scarred scales of his father.

"Don't go dad, please!"

John looked helplessly at his wife. She was frozen, torn between the need to eradicate the threat to her family and the pleading cries of her children.

"Love," John said gently, "Maybe a couple days at home. Let's get them settled in. I know you want to end this, but..." He glanced down at Ban, letting his sentence trail off.

She sighed, and stepped forward to wedge her nose under her son's tail, lifting him up until he could climb up onto John's shoulders. "You're right. We all need a short break. I still have a country to attend to, and your family is probably worried sick about you. Your brother even sailed in apparently."

John felt suddenly less enthusiastic about returning home. He didn't particularly want to deal with his brother, but his children were distressed. They needed him right now, and he wasn't going to let Gregory stop him

from giving them that. "Okay."

Lily gave him a chaste kiss on his cheek, "Maribel, perhaps you'd better climb up with the children. I would prefer not to have you stepped on."

John had memorized the route out to the balcony; Lily and he had spent a number of days there now, soaking in the sun and each other. Today, Lily led him in a new direction. They had to be underground. The halls and rooms around him were not made from cut stone, but carved into uninterrupted rock. The scale of the construction was enormous, even for dragons. The vaulted roof was twice his height, and the hall was wide enough that it could fit three of him abreast. Again, every inch of stone was covered in festive paintings. He couldn't help but notice as they passed through different sections, the orbs on the ceiling were different colors. The hallways tended to be lit in cool blue-white light, while different chambers and alcoves were illuminated in the same warm orange of his recovery room. Every now and then they would pass by partitioned areas that were lit in soft shades of lavender.

Their route through a maze of hallways delivered them into a rotunda that made John pause and take a moment to marvel. If someone had shot an arrow from where he was standing, he doubted they could reach the far wall. A broad stone ramp spiraled along the walls for hundreds of feet above and below them, the center of the vast cavern left empty and hollow. For the first time since becoming one himself, John saw dragons other than his family. Dozens of them padded up and down the ramp on their way to various tasks. More flew through the air in the vast openness of the rotunda. To his surprise, they were one and all a great deal smaller than himself and Lily. Few were over half their size. Several dragons carried passengers as John did, although not many. A handful of humans, a few of the the various beast-folk. As he took in the sight, he saw that a great many of the dragons also had their eyes on him. "Love, why is everyone staring at me? Are the scars that bad?"

Lily stared at him, nonplussed. "Oh!" She laughed. "You've been cooped up, so you wouldn't know. The dragons that saved you came back here with us. They were not discreet about describing the scene of the battle. It is not every day that a single dragon faces a fully opened rift and survives. You're something of a celebrity now. I would imagine most of them think your scars

quite attractive."

As John glanced again and noticed a distinctly carnal appetite on the faces of some onlookers. Male and female.

Lily sensed his discomfiture and leaned in, "Don't let it fluster you, it's normal. Males outnumber females among dragons. Many of them turn to one another for companionship."

"Oh!" He stumbled a step. "I see."

John soon realized why Lily had avoided running into other dragons before. It seemed like every other time they passed someone, Lily was forced to stop and exchange greetings in their language. Despite her jovial teasing John noticed quickly that any time they were approached by a new dragon Lily was positioning herself in front of him, blocking anyone from getting too near her husband. She didn't even seem to notice that she was doing it. The first few times they stopped, John pretended to listen politely, even if he didn't understand a word that was said. By the twentieth such pause, he lost interest, focusing instead of the myriad of dragons. Different colors, different sizes. Some of them were long and sinuous like serpents, others were more compact and dense looking, like John himself. Somewhere around the fortieth stop, he was making up his own words for Lily's conversations to stave off boredom.

At least until a sudden snarled command drew his attention back to the conversation at hand. A small dragoness, red scaled like himself, had tried to edge around Lily's blocking maneuver and come closer to him. Now she huddled submissively as Lily bared her teeth in annoyance. Other dragons passing by glanced at them from the corners of their eyes, but otherwise pretended not to notice.

"Lily?"

She glanced back at him with a pause, and visibly forced herself to relax. "Sorry dear, it's nothing major. Just a young female a little too eager for her own good."

He smiled in confusion, glancing at the red dragoness. She gave a tentative query that he didn't understand.

Lily sighed, and replied more evenly before turning to him. She glanced up at Ban and Laurelie and chewed on her words for a moment before speaking carefully. "Dragons do not tend to be monogamous John. She is starting to plan for her first child, and is propositioning you."

What a bizarre place. He heard Maribel smothering a laugh atop his back.

"Whats mongamouse?" Ban chirped.

"It means married, like your mother and I," John rumbled immediately.

"Oh. Does she want to married you?"

Lily smiled faintly, "In a way, I suppose. As I said John: many here will find your scars appealing. They're proof of strength, if not necessarily good sense. You're also carrying proof of your...parental abilities around on your back. Some dragons will not be shy about seeking out your company."

"Um, she seems very sweet, and I am flattered, but I *am* monogamous." He made his voice as gentle as possible. He might not be able to communicate in words, but he hoped she recognized the tone.

Lily translated for him, and after a moment the young female bobbed her head and departed with a regretful glance back at him.

Lily huffed, "I shouldn't be so upset by this, it is the way of things here. She was out of line though. It is poor manners to make such a request of someone when they are with another partner already."

John shrugged his wings, completely lost in this situation. They continued more briskly, hoping to avoid more awkward encounters. Finally they arrived at the top of the ramp, into yet another massive room. A vestibule that was completely open on one side, giving a view of the sky. Several dragons were

sitting on their haunches behind a circular desk, appropriately sized for them. A reception area. More dragons queued at the desk, waiting to receive or turn in documents. Lily approached the desk and one of the smallish dragons there quickly finished up and turned to her, ignoring his queue. Nobody seemed particularly perturbed by this.

He watched as his wife made her scrawl on several forms, dipping the tip of one claw into an ink well and making a peculiar flourish with it at the bottom of blanket sized documents. "John could you make your mark here?"

He emulated her, dipping his claw in the ink and signing his name somewhat less neatly. Then they were moving again, out towards the open air. The building gave way and John got to take in the full glory of Syrsarun. The terrace they sat on was perched on the very peak of a mountain. The hallways and rooms they had passed through were all honeycombed into the rock below them. Other terraces and balconies dotted the sides of the mountain, jutting out from sheer cliffs and steep rock walls. Four other peaks were crowned by similar buildings, all of them riddled with their own platforms. There were no roads or buildings between the peaks. Raw forests grew there instead. A few miles away the sea crashed against the cliffs at the base of the range. Off to one side of their terrace, four large stone platforms were erected, thrumming with magical energy and covered completely in carved formulae. One of the platforms surged with a pulse of power as they approached, and the familiar sight of a gateway opened atop it. On the other side he saw the plaza of Lily's palace.

There was no fanfare or celebration on their return. Lily and John wanted nothing more than some peace and quiet. Unfortunately there were things to take care of before they could rest. The advisors she had left in charge of the Blazing Coast were the best she could find, but four months away was a long time for the queen.

"We'll stay for a couple of days. We have to go back to Syrsarun in a week. I've asked the elders to gather for council. For now, I have to go check with my people. I'll meet back with you as soon as I'm done making sure my country isn't falling apart." Lily joked, though there was honest concern in

her voice. "Would you like me to take the children with me? I get the feeling you might want some privacy meeting your brother."

"That might be best, love. I don't know how pleasant the encounter is going to be."

Lily gave him a nod. "Ban, Laurelie, why don't you come with me. Your father is going to go down to the beach and get some sun for a minute. We'll meet him as soon as we're done."

"Okay mom." Ban leapt from his back, gliding across the distance to Lily's. Laurelie simply hopped down to the ground and danced playfully around her mother's feet.

"Mom, can we get food?"

"Of course, Laurelie." The trio departed, heading deeper into the city, towards the administrative buildings.

Maribel stayed with John as he tried to work up his courage. Of all the things he didn't particularly feel like dealing with right now, his brother was near the top of the list. His family was staying in a bungalow down near the shore that Lily had loaned to them. After a moment he decided that it would probably be best to go back to his smaller size for the reunion. It took him a few minutes to get the spell to work. It had been tailored carefully to his body before, and he had to adjust it to accommodate all the new scar tissue. He ached from the compression; it would take some practice to get the spell perfect again. Maribel fell in beside him as he headed towards the beach.

"I think it might be best if I do this alone Maribel. I don't think Gregory is going to be very happy to see me."

"Sorry John, not an option. Queen's orders. If she's not with you, I am." He grumbled, but knew it was pointless to argue. After what had happened, he doubted Lily feel comfortable leaving him alone for quite some time.

They might not have announced their return, but the city was practically

buzzing about it anyhow. Merchants and travelers on the street gawked at him, whispering to each other. Anyone that passed close enough would stop with a bow. "Consort," they greeted him. John frowned. He didn't like it. The dragon was used to being in the background, supporting the queen. The people here had never ignored him, but he'd always been more like a particularly large citizen, and not an object of any attention. Now he felt his scales crawl under the stares and the whispers.

"*-burned down his own home to stop them."*

"*-blew it to pieces. Used his own body to power the spell."*

His ears were too keen by far. It was with some relief that he left the crowds for the relative emptiness of the beach. At least until he remembered why he was here.

He noticed Maribel looking around and followed her gaze. She was not the only battle-mage on the beach. They were being discrete, but John noticed at least a dozen other guards in convenient positions and overlooks at various distances around the row of stone houses. Sheltered in the shade of a rocky bluff, the bungalows were attractive little homes made from cleanly cut blocks of red sandstone. As he approached, the door to one of the houses swung open, and his sister came dashing out at him, barefoot on the sandy beach. She wore a wide smile on her face, which quickly faltered as she saw him fully. Her sprint stumbled into a walk.

"Hi Andy." He smiled.

"John?" Her voice cracked.

How many more times am I going to have to do this? John felt a sudden surge of anger at the demons as he watched tears gather in his sister's eyes. He didn't want to fight, and didn't want to have to comfort his family in the aftermath. He didn't want the attention, or the scars, or any legends spreading about him. He just wanted to be around those he loved. He banished the anger as Andrea reached up carefully to trace the scars running along his face.

Maribel cleared her throat. "I'm gonna go stand over here." She said gruffly.

"Do they hurt?" She touched the edge of his ear where the studs had been torn free and left notches.

"No, I don't hurt anymore. The healers did a good job patching me up. They said even most of the scars will fade in a few decades."

"That's...that's good." She smiled, wiping her eyes with the back of a hand. His parents stepped out onto the beach, walking more slowly. In the bright morning sun, he noticed the three of them were all considerably more tanned.

"It looks like you all have been enjoying the weather. I hope you haven't been burned to badly. The sun can get fierce here." He spoke quickly, hoping to start onto a topic before they could say what obvious on their faces. They stopped in shock a few feet away, looking him over with horror.

His mother put a hand on the scales of his chest, her fingers resting against one of the knots of tissue left over from the poisoned spears. "Look at what they did to you, John." She whispered.

"Mom, can we...can we not?" He swallowed. "I've spent the last four months being reminded of how close I came to dying. I don't want to talk about the scars, or the fight. Can we just talk about something else for now? Tell me how you're liking the beach, or how the business is doing. Whatever you want but this. Please?"

Victoria put on a brave smile and nodded.

"You look well John." His father stammered lamely. "You should come sit on the porch with us. Your mother has just made some sangria." The mage rejoined him as they headed back towards the bungalow, walking at John's left shoulder.

Gregory stepped out of the house as they drew near. John's brother was a

year older than him, but was the spitting image of John's human appearance. Tall, lean, his long golden-brown hair wrapped into braids. People had commonly mistaken them for twins. It was something of an annoyance, as the two had never actually gotten on that well. John had always been quiet, learning his father's business, studying spells whenever he could afford the books, and generally staying out of trouble.

Gregory has been the exact opposite. His youth had been spent brawling, drinking, and in general being a nuisance to anyone that tried to tell him what to do. He rejected any role in the business, and instead insisted that he would be a painter. That's not to say he was a bad sort. Every season for planting and harvest he had helped work the farm from sunup to sundown without complaint, and he had apparently taken up helping Albert after John left. Now he stared coolly from the patio of the bungalow, trying not to let the nervousness show on his face.

"John." The way his brother said the dragon's name didn't sound very much like a greeting.

"Hello Greg." John said tiredly.

His brother looked him up and down before shaking his head. "I didn't actually believe it till now. I guess you really did get cursed into a dragon's body."

"It's not a curse." John sighed, already exhausted with the meeting. "It was a spell meant as a blessing."

"Well, not much of one apparently. You look like you were sewn together from about a hundred different parts."

"Greg, you unbelievable ass!" Andrea hissed at him, staring at the man incredulously. "Have you not been paying attention to anything *at all* since you got here?"

"I got here last night, Andy. All I heard, was that Pastock got attacked by demons, a shit load of people died, and some 'consort' blew himself to bits to

kill a bunch of them."

"John is the Consort, you fucking twat." Maribel growled out the words, her hand on the hilt of her sword.

The dragon wanted very much just to go lay down in the sun. It seemed impossible to him that not so long ago he was sitting in his parent's garden, surrounded by a carefree family.

"I don't care." He said suddenly and loudly, breaking any escalation. "I don't care a single squirt of piss what you think, or what you think you *know*, Gregory. And I'm too tired of this topic by far. You can sit down, shut up and enjoy your time here on the beach, or you can go home. I don't know what you'll find though. It might have been destroyed in the attack."

The patio was silent aside from the sea-breeze whistling through its structure. "I'll go get the wine." Victoria finally said, pushing gently past Gregory.

"Sorry."

John almost believed he'd misheard. Greg hadn't ever been one to apologize. The dragon looked up to find the man looking away. He was proud; the apology must have hurt, whether he meant it or not. The group settled around the patio in a loose cluster as Victoria began handing out drinks. Conversation was slow and awkward to start, but after a couple of glasses of the chilled wine-punch, John started talking about Syrsarun, and the incredible wonder of the mountain-city. His family listened skeptically, but Maribel backed up the fantastical sounding claims. He wondered if there was any protocol for taking them to visit there.

"Aunt Andy!" Laurelie's shriek of childish glee interrupted their conversation. The little green wyrmling sprinted madly across the beach, her brother hot on her tail. Lily had sensibly shrank them all again. The dragoness smiled at her husband as the children climbed directly over the patio rail, piling onto Andrea so that she nearly tipped back in her chair.

"Aunt? They're yours," he looking in disbelief at the children, over to John, and then at Lily, "and yours?"

"They are," Lily purred, joining them on the patio. "You must be Gregory. You look exactly like my husband did when I first met him. Ban, Laurelie, say hello to your uncle Greg."

"Uncle?" Greg stammered.

"Uncle!" Ban replied enthusiastically. He hopped up, so that his front legs were balancing on Gregory's knees, and smiled happily at the man. "Hi uncle Greg, I'm Ban!" His tail thumped against the underside of the table.

"Um, hello." Greg reached up with one hand to gingerly pat the top of Ban's head.

"Hey, I learned a new trick, watch!" Like a spring, the young dragon shot off, leaping up onto the patio rail, and then leaping off. In mid-air, he tucked his head under his chest, somersaulting heels over head, until his four feet were back under him. The sand gave under Ban's paws as he landed, so that he slipped and went sliding across the beach on his chest. In a flash he was back up on his feet.

"Isn't it awesome!" Even Greg couldn't stop a smile from teasing at one corner of his mouth.

Lily lay down next to John, and Ban eagerly mounted the porch again to wedge himself happily between them. "So, how are you all enjoying the Blazing Coast?"

"Well, it certainly lives up to its name." Albert patted his brow with a kerchief. It was only mid-morning, but the sun was already beating down on them. "I am starting to understand why no one around here wears anything decent."

"Albert, I know for a fact that there are weavers here that sell perfectly decent blouses and trousers."

"Blouses and trousers? My wife and daughter can't run around in a shirt and pants. They may as well be running around naked. Not as if the folk here don't do that as well."

"Well, if you hadn't noticed, your son and daughter-in-law are currently naked. That doesn't seem to bother you."

"Lily." John groaned, even as he rejoiced in the lighthearted teasing. It felt far more normal than talk about demons and fighting.

"Yes well, exceptions to the rule and all that." The old man blustered. John could only smirk as the humans around the table fidgeted. "Anyhow, I'd gladly put up with the heat for the chance to see my favorite grandchildren."

"Grandpa, we're your only grandchildren." Laurelie reminded him, still curled in Andrea's lap.

"So? They aren't mutually exclusive."

Laurelie cocked her head to the side. "What?"

As Albert tried to explain to his grand-daughter what 'mutually exclusive' meant, Lily leaned in to whisper in his ear. "Should we tell them?"

John had nearly forgotten the good news they had to deliver. He suddenly felt giddy. "Definitely."

"Albert, I think you're mistaken. I'm fairly certain you now have four grand-children."

"Four?" John's eyes snapped to his wife.

"Four." She confirmed, with a satisfied swish of her tail over his.

"Wait!" Ban demanded. "Where's there other two?"

Lily grinned at her son, sitting up so that she could place a hand over her belly, "Here, Ban. I'm pregnant."

A chorus of congratulations came from John's family as Ban pranced forwards to lean his ear against his mother's scales.

"Awesome! I'm gonna have two brothers!"

"Lily, I'm not comfortable with this." John and his wife stood out in the plaza of her palace in the predawn light. The gateway was already set up to return to Pastock, and Lily had already whispered a quiet goodbye to her sleepy son and daughter.

"John, this is the best compromise I can think of. You stay with here with the children. We can't leave them alone right now, you were right about that. I can work without any distractions, and I'll know that you're safe here." She nodded down to the half-dozen dragons sleeping on the beach. Her paperwork back in Syrsarun had apparently been official requests for assistance. Originally they had been intended to protect their children while both parents where gone, but that plan had changed.

Someone had to stay, there was no way around it. Ban and Laurelie had both spent the previous night stirring with nightmares, and their whimpered pleas not to be left alone had left no option of both parents going together. Lily could send some of her mages, but that was still a poor substitute for going herself. He knew that she was right, and that this was probably the best option they had, but there was no part of him that was happy sending his pregnant wife back to the site of a demon incursion.

She disturbed his thoughts by rubbing her neck and face along his, purring reassuringly. "I already have an escape option, and I don't plan on letting anyone even know I'm there. Okay?"

"Yes, love. I know you know what you're doing. I trust you. I am just ready to be done with this madness."

"That's why I'm going John. So we can be done." She lifted his nose up and kissed the tip of it. "I'll be back in four days, with answers."

The dragoness glanced out at the beach at their guests. "Listen, they've heard the rumors by now that you used to be a man. They're going to pester you, but try not to let them get to you. I can promise you that your behavior is just as strange to them as theirs is to you."

John smirked. "I'm not so fragile that I can't put up with a few unusual guests."

"Good. Love you." She kissed him again.

"I love you too, Lily."

John watched as she triggered the portal, opening it out into a remote spot near Patock and stepped through. With one last wink over her shoulder, the portal shut behind her.

A Curious Thing

While The Blazing Coast was currently sweltering in the heat of summer, Pastock Valley was locked in ice. Lililethan's portal had deposited her on a snowy mountain side, far enough away that no mages from the city could sense the rift in space. In the distance she could just make out the straight lines and edges of Pastock, the structures there all indistinct at this range. The valley looked peaceful now, the pristine snow hiding the damage of the battle that had taken place here. Faint trails of smoke drifted into the afternoon sky from various farms and settlements, giving the illusion of tranquility. The temptation was strong for the dragoness to shatter that tranquility. Someone here had helped them plan the attack on her husband. Once upon a time, Lililethan would have responded to the opening of a rift by purifying the entire valley with fire. But that had been a very long time ago; she had tried to leave that person behind before she had ever met John. No, the temptation was there, but she pushed it aside. Lililethan sighed and lay down in the snow, heedless of the cold. This would have to be done with discretion, not violence.

Discretion started with observation. She needed a way to be in the city unnoticed. She wasn't interested in drawing attention, or risking the children she carried. There were a few options available but there was one that she already had in mind. An option that would let her be in two places at once. It was distasteful, even grotesque. In this case it was necessary, and Lililethan was willing to be distasteful things when necessary.

It didn't take her long to gather a few birds and rabbits, drawn to her by implanted promises of food or shelter. She snuffed out their lives with merciful swiftness, gathering their bodies together, and then disassembling them for the parts that she needed. With surgical precision, she picked and pulled the different bits and pieces together, connecting them and merging them quickly before cell death could start to set in. She consumed the remnants, so as not to let them go to waste, before setting her eyes on the simulacrum she had made. A creature that resembled a cat at first glance, though it was anything but. She had built the body for stealth and mobility. It could run and jump and hide as well as any real cat, but also had a pair of

raven-like wings tucked into the fur on its back. As a last minute thought, she removed the ability of the body to feel pain. If some starving commoner got lucky with a crossbow, she saw no need to suffer the pain of the wound herself.

All that was left was to protect her actual body. She dug her talons into the snow, reaching down to touch the rock beneath. In her mind's eye she could see the vast webs of bonds that held the chemical components of the rock together into a solid. She severed those bonds in long lines, cutting the hillside into enormous, perfectly smooth blocks. Those slabs of stone rose around her, piling up one atop the other, quickly forming a fortress-like cairn over the dragoness. There were no doors or windows, just enough space left between the blocks to allow air and a trickle of light into the mound. The snow rippled up over her temporary tomb, leaving almost no trace of her presence. Finally she spun spells out around the shelter, wards and traps that would paralyze anyone that ventured too close and alert her of intruders. Satisfied that she would be protected, she reached out for her golem.

With a spell very much like the one that had allowed her and John to swap bodies, Lililethan cast herself into her puppet, taking up its strings.

Pastock was certainly not as peaceful up close as it appeared at a distance. Her first loop over the city revealed the scope of the destruction. Nearly half of the outermost district was damaged or destroyed, along with enormous lengths of the walls. With half of the poorest section of the city destroyed, vast fields of huts and shacks had been erected, makeshift shelters to attempt to hold back the cold. Shivering and starving people huddled around fire pits and open air ovens, where uniformed soldiers handed out food. She had forgotten that the attack had hit at the harvest festival. She wondered how much of the crop had been destroyed.

Lililethan had to admire the industriousness of the people of Pastock. In the dead of winter, working in the slush and ice, they had already started recovery efforts. Crews of men and horses dragged cartloads of stone and timber between the shanties, and construction scaffolding rose towards the sky in great forests. It may yet take years for them to recover entirely from the physical damage, but they were on their way. Unfortunately, it looked

like the social damage might take even longer. Lawlessness and violence were common after any disaster or war. After a demon attack, that was exacerbated by paranoia. The fear of conspirators or the possessed drove distrust and hatred among people that may once have been friends. More unscrupulous individuals used this fear to purge enemies or political opponents. Obvious signs of this fear marked the city. Gallows and gibbets were far too common, and many windows were barricaded by freshly installed bars. Bands of men roamed the streets carrying torches and weapons Neighborhood patrols or mobs, she couldn't tell. Copious pamphlets and fliers littered the streets, instructing people to report any suspicious activity to the Magisters, and not take it upon themselves to dispense justice. Despite this plea for sanity there was a general sense of unease among the people out and about.

To her surprise there were more posters nailed to walls and doorways, adorned with colorful images of a stylized red dragon. John was being hailed as a nearly mythical hero. Songs and ballads of his exploits drifted up from street-corner musicians and the windows of bars. It was somewhat comforting, in the midst of their suffering and grief, to hear the people here show gratitude towards her husband. Even if the people were under the belief that he had died in the explosion that had killed the leviathan. It was a bit of good fortune that Lililethan had hoped for, but not counted on. If the people here believed John had died, it was less likely that the demons and their allies would still be searching for him. It had been one of the reasons they had fled to Syrsarun in the first place, instead of simply returning home. Events in the city of dragons did not tend to filter down to human ears. It wouldn't last forever, eventually word of Johnathan's return would eventually filter back here on the lips of merchants and sailors.

She couldn't help but contrast the differences here to how she might imagine her own people would respond to a similar disaster. Yes, in a city of dragons there would be order. Martial law, and curfew. Every dragon would answer to their direct elder, up the complex webs of authority. Every dragon would know exactly where to be every minute of every day. There would be no mob violence, but there would be no songs, or bars, or colorful posters. The committees and councils would spend years or decades deciding what would be rebuilt and what would be replaced. It would be an orderly,

peaceful, bureaucratic hell. Because for a creature that lived centuries, a process that took years was of no bother at all.

The flight over the city proved informative, but not particularly useful to her investigation. The building where they had discovered the hellmouth had burned to the ground. Perhaps it had happened in the battle, but she guessed it was someone covering their tracks. It didn't look like there had been fighting in that area. She had spent a small amount of time examining the hellmouth before the battle. The creature was a gateway for human sacrifice, using the consumed victims to power larger constructs. With the evidence burned to ash, there was no way for her to determine how many people it might have devoured, or who had summoned it. The rift itself was no more help either. Four months had been plenty of time for the gaping pit to be filled in, and now it was blanketed in the same thick snow as the rest of the valley. Lililethan was just about to steer her puppet body towards the palace when she spotted something interesting.

Down below, among the workers and scaffolding, she spotted a large contingent of men wearing Falthwain livery. She perched on an intact fragment of building nearby, scanning the men below. It didn't take her long to spot who she was looking for. Hershel, standing among the soldiers and laborers, helping lift and place stones and timber onto a cleared foundation. His cousin Leroy sat nearby on a stool, directing men from a drafting table before him. Occasionally the knight would reach down and rub his leg just below his knee, where a false wooden leg had been strapped. It was a shame they hadn't provided the knight with something more carefully crafted; Maribel had said she owed this man her life. The lord and his cousin, really everyone present, looked tired and haggard. Eyes were bruised from lack of sleep, and nearly everyone's hands were scraped bloody from the cold stones. She sat and watched as the afternoon wore on into evening, until nightfall forced construction to stop. Hershel and Leroy shook hands with some of the men, sending them off to their barracks, before packing away the drafting table and dragging themselves into the seat of a wagon.

Lililethan used the deepening gloom to smuggle her puppet into the bed of the wagon, hiding behind a basket of tools as the horses started moving. It wasn't until they'd passed out of the shanties, heading along less crowded

streets towards the palace, that either of the men spoke.

"There have been more bodies this month than the last." Leroy grunted. "If we can't stop people from killing each other we'll lose more people to infighting than we did to the battle."

"I don't know what else to do Leroy. Nearly my entire garrison is here, but with so many of the Magisters and the army lost, we don't have enough men to patrol. We could order a conscription, but that might start the riots all over again. People are cold, starving, and afraid. I'm in control for the moment, but if we do anything to lose their trust that could change violently. They've already hung half of the council." Hershel sounded resigned.

"We could offer more coin. Pay the soldiers better, and we may get more recruits."

"We're nearly bankrupt Leroy. Not just the city either, the whole country. The treasury was running low before the attack, and the amount we'd have to pay to convince people to enlist after they watched half their army slaughtered...we just don't have it."

They continued in silence for a time before Hershel spoke again. "There's been no word from the dragon-queen?"

"No, my Lord. Her merchants have continued to sell shipments of grain and rice on credit, but there's been no sign of her since he arrived to collect Johnathan's remains."

Lililethan felt a pang of guilt. She had directed her treasury to pay back any merchant that sold grain here, so there was a supply of food, but there was certainly more that could be done to assist.

"Damn." Hershel swore. "Our man inside the Wright estate had indicated that she had planned on abdicating the throne to spend more time with her family. I wonder if the loss of her husband has broken her."

The rumble of the wagon's wheels quieted as the left the roughly cobbled streets for the smooth pavers of the palace carriage-way. She had to abandon

her hiding spot as servants approached to unload the wagon, and the two Falthwains stepped down. She followed from outside the building as they entered, tracking their path through the windows. Once or twice she lost track of them, only to pick them back up on a higher level or deeper into the palace complex. They eventually stopped, and entered a room. She landed on the window-ledge outside to eavesdrop again. It was a small, cramped study, lit by a hanging lantern and dominated by a large writing desk. The two men sat down, and Hershel retrieved a bottle of dark liquor and two pewter mugs from a drawer.

The two drank, taking a moment to relax from their labors. When Leroy spoke, he was just slightly muffled and distorted by the thick glass pane. "My Lord, when do you plan on sending your family back north? You spoke of the people turning on us, and if that happens, we may not be able to protect them here."

"I know Leroy. But I can't send them away yet. Most of the other nobles haven't been back since the battle. Seeing my children here, and my brothers and cousins working in the streets, it helps them trust that I don't intend to abandon them."

Leroy sighed, but nodded in defeat. He downed the rest of his drink and stood with a groan. "Very well my Lord. Thank you for the drink, but I think I'd best be getting to bed. It'll be another long day tomorrow." The knight bowed, and excused himself.

Lililethan felt just the smallest bit ashamed. Up to this point, Hershel had among her primary suspects. Certainly he had been a generous host, but his keen interest in Johnathan's transformation and the first attack at the banquet had raised too many alarms. His efforts here in the city, and his willingness to risk his family to keep order here, didn't seem like the actions of a person that had released a plague of demons. She couldn't even be surprised or suspicious that he wound up in control: the man was clever, and his lands to the north had been mostly untouched by the effects of the battle. She had originally left him behind in the hopes that he would survive to make his political changes, and it appeared that he had turned the situation to his advantage. As Hershel poured himself another drink and began reading a stack of reports, she

contemplated where to look next.

As much as she didn't want to make an appearance, or get involved with the politics here, it would likely be the fastest way to get answers. The dragoness could spend days searching building to building, and room to room, digging through the smallest clues, but it might be possible to move things along more quickly. She could use the investigation itself to try and drive any guilty parties to the surface. By informing the Hershel and the rest of the lords that she was seeking out the source of the demons she could potentially bait the summoner into action. She knew it had to be someone with resources enough to hide the dozens or hundreds of sacrifices, someone that most likely resided here in the palace. And, if her appearance didn't work as bait, she could at least do her best to support the city and calm the paranoia that gripped it. But she still had to take the utmost of precautions. She wasn't willing to take any risks with the two young dragons growing within her. After a moment of thought, she knew what she would have to do. Lililethan guided her puppet body to the roof and severed the connection.

Lililethan had worked through the night on her preparations, flying in just before the first rays of the sun. Even before she had landed on the grand boulevard of the Palace, soldiers were running to meet her. She had made her form small enough that she would be able to maneuver inside the structure, and perhaps less intimidating to boot, judging by the way she was suddenly swarmed with men all trying to speak to her at once. It seemed that Johnathan's name was on all of their lips. A burly man with sergeant's bars on his shoulders pushed to the front of the crowd, silencing the rest of the group before addressing her.

"Queen Lililethan, we've been hoping you would return. I'm Sergeant Harwick. We met briefly at Frostmire." The dragoness had to think a moment to recall the name.

"Ah, I remember. That seems like so long ago now."

"Yes my Lady. It does."

Lililethan nodded up towards the palace, "It is short notice, but I would like an audience with the council if that can be arranged."

"Of course my Lady. Lord Hershel currently heads the council, and he's the only one in the city today," Harwick sounded disgruntled about that fact, "but he's been hoping for a chance to speak with you." The rest of the soldiers parted for them almost reverently as the sergeant led them towards the main entrance to the palace. Men bowed and mumbled as she passed.

"My apologies for the boys back there, my Lady." Harwick said softly, "Many of them were on the walls during the battle. They owe their lives to your husband."

"Thank you." It was hard for Lililethan to keep a straight face. Part of her wanted to smile with the secret knowledge that John was in fact perfectly alive, but part of her wanted to rage and scream at the remembered agony of being powerless to help him. Harwick must have taken her struggle for grief, and remained respectfully silent as he guided her through the corridors that she had followed last night.

"Queen Lililethan!" Hershel nearly collided with them as he rounded a corner, already heading towards the front door. He was dressed in finely tailored, but durable clothes that were obviously meant for work, with a long sword at his hip. "I was not sure you would be returning."

"Neither was I, to be quite honest." Lililethan lied smoothly. She respected Hershel, but she had also overheard him talking about his spies inside the Wright estate. She wasn't about to give him any hints that John was alive quite yet.

Harwick gave Hershel and the queen a brief bow of parting, then turned to shoo away a group of soldiers that had drawn too close in curiosity. Once the last pair of listening ears had left, Hershel continued.

"My condolences for your husband. We had worried that his death might have destroyed any interest in this place for you."

"It did for a time. But this is still Johnathan's home, and some day his family would like to return here. I intend to make sure that the city is safe before then."

"That is an enormous comfort to us." Hershel said with honest relief. "Things have been unstable here, and the citizens are at each other's throats. Your presence here might help stop that. Perhaps we can arrange a public address?"

"Certainly, I will provide whatever aid is needed. I'm certain I can speed up your reconstruction efforts as well, but first I would like to view any reports, interrogations, or investigations from your Magisters leading up to and after the attack. I still intend to find the person that summoned those demons."

Surprise briefly cracked the man's calm mask. "My Lady, surely you can't expect to find them after this long? No sane man would have stayed in the city after causing that. That's if they weren't killed in the battle or the riot afterwards."

She narrowed her eyes at the human lord, letting every drop of her very real anger slip into her lie. "Someone killed my husband, Hershel. I would have let this whole valley burn to save him. I will not rest until I find out who summoned those demons. I don't care if they've fled to the bottom of the deepest ocean. I will make them pay for what they've done."

"I see." He turned away from her, silent for a moment. "I wish you would reconsider. The violence in the city is getting worse. We lost most of our men in the attack, and those we have left aren't able to keep the peace."

"I will help you attend to the well-being of your city Lord Hershel, but first I want to collect those materials. A matter of an hour or two won't make a difference."

He gave a resigned sigh and faced her with a tight smile. "As you wish. The Magisters keep their records locked in the vaults down in the cellar. We can start there if you wish."

"That would be wonderful."

The stonework around them grew older and more worn as they delved into older and older parts of the fortress. Hershel grabbed a lantern as they descended below ground level, the flickering flame providing just enough light to make their way. Patches of moss and lichen grew in patches on the walls, and the smell of mold was thick in the air. The smell rung up a very faint memory: she had first met Johnathan responding to a summons in a room very much like this. Lililethan had spent quite a bit of time scrying on the palace before their visit, and she was fairly certain the human lord had gotten lost, they were moving farther from the vaults.

The device and spell were extremely well hidden, the magic was designed to work to augmented the physical trap. A tiny flicker of magic from Hershel was the only warning she had, giving her a bare heartbeat to react. She started moving instinctively, trying to leap through the kill zone. Not quite fast enough. The array of needle-tipped spikes that had been concealed above her launched with explosive force, piercing through her scales and impaling her legs, hips, and tail to the floor. She was slammed into the ground, a bellowing scream of pain cut short as her chin smashed against the stone flooring, clacking her jaws together with a snap. The impact sent her vision spinning for a moment. When it cleared, Hershel was standing over her with his sword dug into the scales of her throat.

"Damn you, it wasn't supposed to be this way!" His mask had fallen, and his face was twisted in desperate rage.

Blood quickly pooled around her legs and belly, but the pain of the metal spears buried in her body was washed out by fury and betrayal. The man had thoroughly fooled her. He had never shown the barest hint of a spell before, and his face had betrayed no emotion up to the ambush. She clawed at the human, her body instinctively reaching to swipe at him past the sword. Nailed to the floor as she was, she couldn't quite reach. "You rat! Traitorous coward scum!" She coughed on her insults as her movements drew spikes of agony through her.

"You two should have never come here, none of this would have happened if you had stayed away. Everything is falling apart." Hershel ignored her. He looked nearly on the edge of tears.

"Horse shit!" She tasted blood. Had one of the spears pierced her stomach? "Those demons were here before we arrived. It was you! You had them waiting for us."

"No! They weren't meant for you. I was using them to take control of the council. Everything was going to plan, I was almost in a position to make changes here, to make this place better." He shook his head and pressed on the sword, drawing another bead of blood. "But once they found out your damned husband was here, they went berserk. They wanted him captured, wanted to know more about the transformation. There was never supposed to be an attack, not at the banquet and not with a rift, but things got out of control."

"That's what happens when you work with demons, you idiot." She wheezed as her body began to lose strength. It explained his interest in Johnathan. He'd been trying to appease the demons he'd summoned.

"I tried to stop it, tried to keep you in the north, but you wouldn't listen. I didn't intend to harm either of you." Hershel finished softly.

Lililethan glared at him. Good intentions or not, he had still helped feed that hellmouth. He had sacrificed an unknown number of people to a fate worse than death in an attempted takeover. But he still hadn't killed her.

"Don't do this, Hershel. I'm pregnant, my husband's last gift. Our children played together! Johnathan saved your life! You can still turn yourself in, face the consequences and die like a man. Like my husband."

Hershel hesitated, and then straightened up, his face becoming the cold mask once more. "You said you would have let this valley burn to protect him. I am willing to live with your blood on my hands to protect this valley. I'm sorry." He pressed the sword into her neck. Lililethan severed the connection.

There was a brief lurch as Lililethan's consciousness fled from the carefully crafted false clone into her true body, still hidden in the cairn up on the mountainside. The memory of her puppet's pain twisted in her gut for an instant, before it was washed away in cold fury. It was a story that was all too familiar. A mage with all the best intentions and far too much pride, in over his head cavorting with demons. Her own husband had made a similar mistake, to a much lesser degree. But Johnathan had stayed, he had refused to back out of the circle and let someone else pay the price. This coward, this *worm*, would have killed her and her children to hide his mistakes. It was unlikely his trap would have done much to her real body, but the intent had been there. He had looked her puppet in the eyes and put a sword through its neck, fully believing that it was her. Hershel had managed to convince her that he was not a mage, and had fooled her into believing he was an honorable man. But her bait had worked, and had lured him out. Now he would suffer for his treachery.

Lililethan's cold fury grew quite hot. The cairn exploded, the massive slabs tumbling through the air as her form expanded rapidly. John had learned the trick to shrinking himself, shunting unwanted mass temporarily out of reality. Now she did the opposite. Her body swelled and expanded, twice her normal size, three times. When her tail flicked in agitation, it cut down a row of timber like matchsticks. When she spread her wings and launched herself skywards, the storm of wind cleared the hillside of snow. When she vented her anger in an earsplitting roar, the entire valley shivered from the sound. The force and volume of her voice ripped through the air, compressing it into a cone of fog that streamed behind her as she flew through it. Fire bubbled from her teeth as images of Pastock bathed in flame filled her head. With another furious roar, Lililethan forced herself to let that fantasy fall away. She forced herself to breath, and throttled back her seductive anger. She and the citizens of Pastock had been betrayed by the same man; the dragoness couldn't punish the people for a crime that had harmed then easily as much as it had her.

Instead of descending on the city, she circled over head. All eyes turned skywards as her wings blocked out the morning sun, and her voice was loud

to carry to every citizen and soldier. "Hershel Falthwain is the man responsible for the attack on the city and my husband. You have one hour to bring him to me before I come in to get him." Her words echoed over Pastock.

She landed on the main road away from the city, out of range of the guns, and waited. There was still plenty of time left in that hour when a rising clamor reached her from behind the walls. The shouting and screaming of a mob. Soon after people began flooding out of the gates, an angry throng of citizens all chasing after a group of riders. The mob froze just outside the gates as they saw her waiting, the riders continued on. A bloodied Hershel was in the middle, his hands bound, surrounded on all sides by grim looking men. They had to dismount nearly a quarter mile away, the horses refusing to approach the towering dragoness any closer. Hershel's own cousin Leroy was at the vanguard, limping along with the support of Sergeant Harwick. Both men had looks of disgust and anger. They stopped before her, shoving the bound prisoner ahead of them. Hershel stumbled and nearly fell.

"We found him in the catacombs, standing over..." Leroy gestured at the dragoness. "Standing over your body. We thought he'd murdered you. Tried to use spells to get away." The man's voice broke. Tears of anger streamed down his face. Lililethan could commiserate with his sense of betrayal.

"He tried." She snarled. "It was a foolish attempt, but he did try."

Hershel did his best to look defiant. It wasn't very effective, with his face swollen from blows and his once handsome clothing covered in offal. "I did what I had to, to protect my home. Now get it over with dragon; take your revenge."

Lililethan knocked him from his feet with a casual flick of one claw, resting the tip of it on his chest as she leaned down, peering at the man with an eye that was as large as he was. "Revenge is...such a curious thing. A petty emotion, often directed without thought or logic. But sometimes, just sometimes, the desire for revenge is targeted at a truly guilty party. In some cases, revenge and justice are one and the same."

She hooked her claw in the front of his clothing, and hoisted him up with it so that he dangled from the tip of her finger, mere feet from her jaws. Teeth that were as large as he was snapped shut in his face. "You will die today human. But first you will tell me the name and sigil of every demon you summoned."

Hershel rolled his head away from her, his lips sealed tight. She bared her teeth, letting flames lick between them. Just enough heat that she could smell burning hair. "The names, Hershel. Unless you would like me to see how slowly I can roast you alive."

"Damn you, coward! Tell the queen, you owe her that much for what you've done!" Sergeant Harwick's face was red with fury as he shouted up at the fallen lord. Hershel flinched, seeming more pained by the words than the threat of torture.

"On one condition!" Hershel finally broke. "You take my family away from here. They are innocent, they knew nothing about this. They won't be safe here now, not after what I've done."

Lililethan growled, the sound making pebbles jump and dance on the icy road. She very nearly said no. Images of Johnathan laying broken and bloody on the fractured ground filled her head, his limbs twisted and torn. Followed by the memory of Hershel staring coldly down the length of a sword. The dragoness forced herself to take a breath and remember the little girl that had clung, squealing with laughter, to Laurelie's back as the two played. Hershel's family likely was innocent, and she knew that John himself would accept the deal in a heartbeat. "Very well, I will offer asylum to your family."

Hershel sagged, the fight going out of him. "There is a book, in a hidden compartment in the north stables. It contains all my notes. All the sigils and names." He had the good grace to look ashamed. "I am sorry, about your husband. I didn't intend that."

Lililethan knew she shouldn't bother with it, but she couldn't help take some satisfaction. Her jaws split in a feral grin as she purred out the words. "Many people died as a result of your mistakes Hershel. Those sacrificed to

the hellmouth, and those lost in the battle. But my husband is not among them. Johnathan is alive and well."

The human stammered, his face blank. She knew that she should offer this man to the local courts, and let their own justice take course. She couldn't help herself as the rest of her fingers curled inwards, nearly crushing her betrayer. Hershel gasped and went red in her grip. Her anger pulsed in her ears as she stared down at the gasping human in her paw, almost willing him to die. Very slowly she became aware of the rest of the humans, backing away with looks of terror on their faces. Her grip loosened, just enough for the fallen lord to draw a breath.

"Send for a judge. We are arranging a trial today. Leroy, I want you specifically to retrieve that book. Do not open it, and do not let anyone else touch it." She managed to speak the words with a relatively calm rumble. The men, still cast under her immense shadow, bowed and hurried to obey, leaving only Hershel to keep her company. He didn't bother to speak. Perhaps for the best, she wasn't sure she could have kept herself from killing him if she'd heard his voice.

It didn't take long for Leroy, Harwick, and the other soldiers to return. Lililethan had retained her enormous size, and her grip on the traitor, but she had moved closer to the city. Soon, a crowd had gathered, out in the snowy fields. The judge and jury arrived, along with Leroy and the book. The trial was obviously unfair with her looming over the proceedings, but it wouldn't have mattered. They had retrieved her broken puppet body from the cellars, Hershel's sword still lodged in its neck. Between the men who had found him standing over the corpse, and Hershel's own admission that the book of summoning rituals was his, there wasn't a court in the worlds that would free him. Even his own wife hadn't shown up to ask for leniency.

Within an hour the jury had found him guilty, and the judge delivered the only sentence he could. Soon there was an order for a hangman. Lililethan felt strangely empty, even as her heart pounded and her eyes narrowed in rage. This was one thing she couldn't allow. Hershel would feel no noose around his neck; she had to be the one to end him. It was a need that she couldn't seem to banish or lock away. She unceremoniously snatched the

traitor up once more, and before anyone could protest, tossed him away from the crowd into an empty patch of snow. The dragon-queen opened her mouth, and blew a stream of fire so intense that it boiled the snow and turned the soil to clay in a long line that ended at Hershel. The man was incinerated before he could make a sound. When the stream of fire ended, not even ash remained.

Lily sat down in the snow and released her extra size, her body returning to its smaller, but still immense, natural form. There was a shocked silence from the gathered witnesses. She sagged a little at the sudden emotional drain, before speaking. "I will need to speak to the remaining Lords. The Blazing Coast will be funding the reconstruction of Pastock until you are all back on your feet."

The queen spent two more days in Pastock, doing what she could to put the place at rest. She personally lent her spellwork to rapidly reconstruct sections of housing. She was no architect, but with the guidance of human masons and planners, she had made as least some progress. She'd also extended monetary aid for the hiring of more soldiers and constables, as well as arranged for the arrival or larger, more organized food shipments. As her time frame drew to a close and she wrapped up the last of her tasks in the city, Lily had a couple of errands to make before she left the valley. First she flew briefly to the Wright estate, to estimate the damage. There had apparently been some fighting here, mopping up straggling demons, but it hadn't been too terrible. The house and most of the outbuildings were intact, although the orchard and pastures were wrecked. When she nudged a door open and peered inside the house she was greeted by a gaggle of some dozen terrified squatters.

"Hello." She greeted them politely.

They regarded her blankly, edging towards other rooms.

"This is my husband's childhood home. You are welcome to stay for the winter and keep warm, but I would ask that you treat the house respectfully."

One by one the humans blinked out of their panicked stupor as they

recognized her. Men and women looked at one another nervously, and then slowly began to kneel.

"Stop that." She said quickly, startling them, "I'm not here to frighten you off. I'm here to offer you a job. Take care of the estate for the winter, clean up what you can. I have a pouch of gold strapped to my chest right now and another when the Wrights return."

Slowly, one of the men approached carefully. He actually seemed a bit familiar. "Have we met?"

"Horace, my Lady, I was the steward here when you visited last. I uh, brought my family here from the city to keep them safe."

"Well, that's very smart of you. Here," she pulled her head back to nose the pouch strapped to her front, "take this."

Horace tentatively stepped forward to untie the rather hefty pouch.

"There will be larger food shipments coming in next week. You should go down to the city and get stocked up, just in case anything interrupts the supply."

"Of course, thank you my Lady." He gave her a bow fit for a trained steward.

She bobbed her head in return before backing away and taking flight. She still had one more stop to make. Lily couldn't quite say what drove her to fly up to the enormous crater that Johnathan had created. Or why she felt the need to carefully blow the snow away with flurries from her wings. She wasn't even sure what she felt, or expected to feel as she looked down at the spot where Johnathan had fallen. The blood had long since washed away, but shattered fragments of faded red scales still lingered here and there. She just felt that she needed to see it, perhaps to remind her of the reasons behind her actions. Absently lifting one paw up to cradle her belly, she stared at the sight for a while, before heading back to begin arranging the portal home.

Two days had not been nearly enough for Hershel's family to overcome their grief. It was somewhat awkward for her to be around them, having executed the man herself, so she left Leroy to make most of the arrangements for their transport. They would make the portal from the Frostmire, taking as many staff and family as felt like coming. The other residents of the north had already heard of Hershel's fate, and they were in the process of determining who would take ownership of the castle. They had no intentions of waiting for the nobles back in Pastock to choose who their new lord would be. It was one more headache that would need to be sorted, but things would be stable enough for now. With the gate constructed and everyone ready, Lily opened the portal back to Wake, capitol of The Blazing Coast. Hot desert air and cold frozen wind combined into a pool of rippling fog that billowed around the gate. Lily had scheduled their return at night, to give the newcomers a chance to adjust to the heat before the full brunt of the summer sun. The Falthwain family trudged through first, casting longing last glances at their home as they left it, likely forever. The remaining House of Lords had already stripped them of all titles and claims. There was nothing left for them here.

Once the last human was through, Lily stepped through herself, directly into the warm embrace of her husband. Johnathan waited just on the other side of the portal, and she had barely cleared it when he reared back and pulled her to him.

"Lily." He breathed her name in her ear as he squeezed her tightly, his face pressed against her cheek. She closed her eyes and practically melted in his arms, the tension of the trip to Pastock flooding out like water through a drain. Lily knew that she needed to take care of the refugee family, she needed to check with the visiting dragons. But she had to enjoy this, just for a minute. It was Maribel's voice that moved her again. The mage was sharing a firm handshake with Leroy.

"It's good to see you, Leroy. The Queen informed me that you need a visit to an artificer. We have one waiting for you."

Lily reluctantly peeled herself away from Johnathan and stood up to address the family. "Maribel has arranged some housing for you in the guest

wing of the palace. It is quiet this time of year. We don't get many visitors in the summer heat so you should all have some privacy. My people can carry your luggage. Take the night to try to relax and adjust. We're on opposite sides of the world, so you'll have trouble sleeping for a few days. Much of the city is active at night during the summer, feel free to ask the guards to explore."

Hildi gave a formal curtsy, and tried to smile gratefully, though her eyes were red and swollen with tears. Lily felt a certain guilt that she had been sitting here embracing her husband in front of the woman that had so recently lost hers to Lily's own hand. The woman led her children away, along with several of Hershel's siblings and extended family that had opted for the safety of asylum. Leroy stayed behind a moment longer, his eyes wide as he looked Johnathan up and down.

"Consort. Queen Lililethan had told me that you had been injured, but I wasn't aware of the extent."

Lily saw John clench his jaw as the one-time knight gave a familiar lamentation for his scars. But her husband listened politely before nodding his head. "Thank you Sir Leroy."

"You may as well just call me Roy, Consort. My knighthood was stripped, I'm no sir and I'm not likely to be with the last name Falthwain."

Lily shrugged, "Change it. The name means nothing here, good or bad. We have no knights, but there are other accolades and positions you can earn. Now, I believe Maribel here feels honor bound to get rid of that wooden leg and fit you with something that won't have you limping."

Leroy smiled faintly, and took the woman's offered arm of support. They talked quietly as they headed away deeper into the city towards the waiting artificer.

A grateful sigh escaped Lily as she was finally left alone with her husband. She couldn't seem to relax around the bereaved family, and it was no mystery why. She didn't regret Hershel's execution, but she wondered if it might have

been better to let the hangman do it. Having the fallen lord's blood on her hands had created a terrible thought in her head that she couldn't seem to banish. Johnathan was watching her with concern. "I read the reports that Maribel received. Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. Maybe." She shook her head at her own indecision. "Not tonight. I just..." She looked up at the bluffs just outside of the city. The faint outlines of their new house were visible against the night sky. Johnathan and the children had moved in while she had been gone. "I just want to see Ban and Laurelie, and try and forget being a queen for one night."

John nodded, and stood. She followed along side him shoulder to shoulder, letting her length rub against his as they made their way quietly out of the plaza and up onto the rocky hillside. Their new home was built of the same red and pink sandstone blocks as most of the rest of the city. Lily's old home consisted of three simple rooms: a entry chamber that opened onto the Plaza, a private sleeping area, and a large bathing pool. It was currently being converted into a public bath. Their new home had private bedrooms to spare, some common areas, and a very comfortably sized master suite. Normally the terrain on top of the rocky cliffs was too rugged and unstable for building, but she had fortified and cleared a large plot specifically for their home. It had the dual benefits of not using land that the rest of the city might need to expand, while also ensuring a fair degree of privacy. Aside from some colorful murals and tile, the inside of the house was not particularly opulent. It was a waste to have expensive furniture or artwork that their children might easily destroy as they grew into their bodies.

There were a few amenities though. Some sturdy sofas and tables for human visitors, and things more tailored to dragons. Large outdoor terraces for soaking in the sun, and several large pits of clean white sand for lounging. The pits were surrounded by buried pipes that could carry hot or cold water, heating or cooling the sand depending on the season. Two of those pits were currently occupied by young, male, red-scaled dragons. Artun and Phyr, the two that had managed to stabilize Johnathan after the battle, and two of the dragons that had responded to her request for guards. They both opened their eyes drowsily, and then quickly stood when they saw her approaching across the large parlor. They bore a passing resemblance to Johnathan, at least

before all the scars. Of course, red was among the most common colorations.

"Queen Lililethan." Artun greeted her in a chipper voice as the bent out their fore-legs and lowered their chests to the ground in genuflection.

"Artun, Phyr. I see you are both enjoying yourselves. I take it the children are asleep?"

"They are." Phyr chirped as he straightened back up. "They tried to stay up, but we spent most of the day swimming. Johnathan carried them both to bed nearly an hour ago."

"I see. Where are all the others?" There were supposed to be six guards.

"They are all on the beach." Artun blurted the words in his hurry to speak before Phyr could. "They thought it was disrespectful to enjoy your house before you did."

"I did invite them." John clarified. Like Lily, the two smaller dragons had spent a good deal of time among humans. They were somewhat less enamored of all the social etiquette that other dragons obsessed over.

"Well, if one of you two could go down and invite them up. There is plenty of room here." The two males looked at each other for a moment before scrambling to be the first one out onto the terrace. Phyr was closer, and leapt into the sky before Artun had even made it outside. With a sullen glare, the lone dragon stalked back over to his pit and flopped down.

Lily rolled her eyes. "We're going to go check on the children and then retire for the evening. Please ask the others not to disturb us unless it's something important."

"Okay." Artun grumbled.

The children were fast asleep in their room, adjacent to the master suite. Ban and Laurelie both still smelled of sea-salt, huddled up together on a bed of cushions large enough for them to have room to grow. Lily felt a pang of

anxiety; she and John had spent so many years sleeping alongside their children that she almost regretted giving them their own room. It was time though, both young dragons were more than old enough to begin learning the first steps of independence. "They didn't fuss over having to sleep alone?" Lily whispered quietly once they'd shut the door

"No love, they were quite excited. I imagine there may be nights when they still want to cuddle, but I think they were ready."

She smiled sadly, and nodded. It was the way of things. Children grew up, and one day they would spread their wings and go on to live their own lives. At least she and John would have the blessing of many, many more years to share with them. They stepped into the master suite, and Lily took a moment to take in their new quarters. It was a little bit more ornate than the rest of the house, with a partitioned bathing area and its own private balcony looking out over the cliffs. The massive bed of cushions was raised up on a platform, allowing them an unobstructed view of the ocean. Lily climbed gratefully into bed, the first proper one she'd slept in since she left for Pastock. In an instant John was curled up around her, his head resting over her heart and his hand splayed out over her belly. She hummed contentedly, resting her hands on his neck and cheek, her fingers absently tracing the lines of scars that made a patchwork over his face.

"You're starting to show Lily." He mumbled, turning his face to gently nibble on her scales.

She smiled as his tongue and lips tickled over her chest. "More than that. I started to feel them moving this week."

Johnathan looked at her with his eyes wide, and then shifted, curling tighter around her so that he could press one ear to her emerald plated stomach. She waited, holding her breath. After a moment, she felt his lips curl up against her hide.

"I can hear them. Just barely, but I hear them." His voice was reverent and soft. He lay like that for long minutes, his head against her belly and his hands next to it, tenderly caressing the new, slight swell in her middle. She

watched his head slightly rise and fall with every breath she took. When he eventually turned to face her, his eyes were practically beaming with adoration. Lily's heart sped up as her husband crept up the bed, his body sliding against hers as he moved to take her face in his hands, pulling her in for a deep kiss. "You are amazing Lily."

She laughed into the kiss, pulling him closer to her, until he was draped along her body and she could wrap her wings around him. "We're amazing John. They're all your children too."

"I know." He kissed her. "I love them all so much." He kissed her again. "I can't wait to meet these two." Lily was panting by the third kiss. No matter how often they were together, Lily never felt like she could get enough of the dragon that was now licking fervently at her throat. The way he praised her, the way he touched her. The way he lapped and nipped at her neck like he was starving to taste her. John was not a pushover. His dedication to coming back to her in the first place showed that. His scars *proved* that. But he worshiped her, and it drove her wild. He broke away from her grip, squirming backwards under her wings and trailing long, wet strokes of his tongue the whole way. He paused once more to shower affection over her belly. He touched or kissed every inch, his hands stroking down her sides and back around to her hips and thighs.

When his teasing snout finally drifted lower, he looked up, meeting her eyes with a hungry smile. He opened his jaws and panted down over her sex. Lily sighed and lay her head back, giving him permission to take this at whatever pace he wanted. She heard his satisfied rumble as his hot breath washed over her again and again, growing slowly warmer as he drew closer. When his smooth-scaled lips made contact it sent an electric buzz up the dragoness's spine. She squirmed in place as he kissed over her needy vent, slowly flicking his tongue out to clean errant drops of her excitement. Bit by bit he increased the pressure, each touch of his tongue a little bit firmer than the last, until he was pressing it between her folds. Her tail shivered as the slick, hot muscle rolled over her entrance. And then he was inside. She opened around his tongue as the fine tip of it wriggled past her lips and burrowed deeper. Her husband probed with a surgeon's precision and a master's knowledge, already well aware of every favorite spot. She had to

bite back a groan as he passed over the firm row of sensitive bumps at the top of her passage.

The dragoness arched her back and spread her wings, every muscle in her body going rigid as he lavished that spot with his undivided attention. She could smell her own arousal in the air, mingled with Johnathan's own excited scent. Every wet slurping slap of his tongue heralded a new spike of pleasure, until her eyes were rolling and her toes curling.

"John!" Her voice was weak with pleasure. "Wait!" She lifted her head as he slowed and stopped. When he pulled away with a questioning look, the white and red patchwork scales of his muzzle were glistening and dripping.

"I want you inside." She practically begged. He smiled proudly, and stood. His rigid shaft was bouncing between his legs, as full as she'd ever seen it.

"I thought you'd never ask love." He carefully crawled over her, stepping over her twitching wings, until they were face to face. Slowly, he lowered himself to her, his lips finding hers and his crown nestling between her folds. He didn't tease her, but he didn't thrust right in either. Instead there was a gentle, comfortable stretch as he sank into her with one long, deliberate motion. She couldn't hold back her moan this time as her body was wedged open, her muscles rippling in welcome, practically pulling John deeper inside. Inch after gloriously hard inch sunk between her legs, each one just a little wider than the last. Lily reveled in the fullness, the intensely pleasurable pressure in her loins. His shaft flexed and pulsed inside of her, every little twitch sending another lovely tingle of pleasure through her limbs. She grabbed him with all four paws, her fingers digging into his shoulders and her toes digging into his haunches. Just holding him there as she clenched around him, enjoying the feeling of being stuffed.

His steely blue eyes were locked on hers, his face crinkled up in amusement as he kissed her. She couldn't resist returning his completely besotted smile, even as his body rolled against her like a slowly cresting wave. The sinuous motion rubbed every inch of their bodies together, ending with a grinding thrust down into her. Every time his hips shoved against hers, his chest lifted just fractionally to start the next plunge. Every time he

bottomed out in her sex, it inched her that much closer to her peak. After his oral attentions, she was only inches away already. Her wings flared out once more as her body began to clench in the first throes of her climax. John turned his head to the side, locking his jaws with hers fully, his tongue twisting around hers, still coated in her own arousal. And just like that she was over the edge. She clenched around him, her passage desperately trying to hold him inside. She cried out into his mouth, their breath mingling in desperate little puffs as Lily pulled her mate to her with every orgasm-enhanced fiber of muscle. She was faintly aware of the sudden eruption deep in her belly, the swelling and flaring of the spines and ridges on his crown pressing her walls apart even wider. A thick, delightful burden built in her gut as Johnathan emptied himself into her body. The constant throbbing surges of pressure only served to drive on her peak, and it felt like many long minutes before she finally regained her senses.

Her draconic lover gradually went slack atop her as she sucked deep breaths through her nostrils, still locked in a feral kiss. Only for a moment longer though, before both dragons' need to breathe overcame their passion. Johnathan released her mouth with a gasp, his head falling limp next to hers on the bed. She lovingly wrapped him back up in her wings, the vast verdant webs of skin gleaming in the moonlight that came through their window. Her mate shivered atop her for a few minutes more, and she crooned out her joy to him as he continued to release small trickles of seed. That job was already done, but she still enjoyed the intimate experience. She relished the familiar, comfortable bond with her husband as he eventually calmed, and his tongue once more tickled over the scales of her neck.

"Mmm, you have no idea how I needed this tonight." She murmured.

Johnathan rocked very slightly with a laugh. His reserves finally depleted, he managed to push himself up enough to look into her eyes once more. It would be a while longer before he could fully free himself, but Lily didn't mind keeping part of him prisoner for now.

"I thought your heat was long over Lily." He teased gently.

"It's not that John. I love being with you, in every way. But it's more than

that. It's the way you look at me. The way you touch me."

His face softened in concern, and he dropped to his elbows so that he could cup her face. She smirked as he demonstrated exactly what she had just said. "The way I look at you? Are you okay Lily? Did something happen in Pastock?"

She gave him one more quick kiss. "I'm okay. I'm okay with you John." She could say it honestly. "You know I've done things in the past. Things that I regret. I think I've done something else I will regret." He nodded quietly, not interrupting but rubbing the pad of one thumb over her brow.

"I don't want to spoil the night John. I'm honestly happy, together. You just help me remember that even if I wasn't always a good person, I can keep on being one now."

He looked like he wanted to speak, but after a moment he just smiled and nodded. "Okay. Let me know if you ever forget it."

Ban and Laurelie ambushed them the next morning as the first sunlight lit their room. A half dozen amused dragons watched through the open doorway as the two children woke Lily with excited, screaming pounces. She welcomed the attentions, and sat in bed with them awhile as they shared their most recent adventures.

"And then, Artun picked me up! And then he threw me so far!" Ban enthusiastically demonstrated the words by leaping from her back to John's.

"Not too far I hope." She asked meaningfully, looking up at the young red that was still watching from the open door to the common area. Artun had the good manners to quickly look away.

"Maggie was out there! He put me on his back!" Maaglieth, a slightly over-built male dragon with muddy brown scales smiled politely. He didn't seem to mind the nickname.

"Well I was under water." Laurelie sounded victorious, as though her exploits trumped her brother's. "Phyr showed me how to hold my breath a really long time. And then you can use your fly-eyes to see underwater!" Lily's daughter had finally gotten used to voluntarily closing her nictitating lids, but being unable to say nictitating, simply called them fly-eyes.

"Well that sounds very exciting." Lily grinned at Laurelie and blinked her own 'fly-eyes' once. "Did you see any fish?"

"Yeah!" The tiny green dragoness giggled, blinking in return. "I almost ate one!" She snapped her jaws together as though she had a fish right there.

"Speaking of eating," John rumbled, "how would you both like to go have breakfast with your grandparents? I heard Andrea was making some fig pie this morning."

Ban and Laurelie nearly ran out of the room in their excitement. Lily and Johnathan had to hurry to catch up.

"Queen Lililethan, a moment please?" Artun made sure to show proper respects surrounded by at least four other well-mannered dragons. Even a dragon that spent most of his time among humans didn't want to have too bad of a reputation.

"Yes, of course." She paused, her eyes on John dashing to catch up to the children.

"Now that you've returned, are we all free to depart?" Artun and Phyr had agreed to go back to Pastock Valley and continue to assist with security and reconstruction. She figured who better than two red dragons that the average human could easily mistake for John. The others would all return to Syrsarun.

"Oh yes, thank you all for responding to my request for aid. Payment has been arranged for services rendered. Do any of you require assistance in calibrating or empowering the gateway?"

When none of the dragons spoke up she gave a brief bow of her head and

shoulders. "Thank you all again your your assistance."

Lily caught up with her family, and the four dragons made their way down to the beach. The Wrights had already set up on the front patio of the bungalow, trying to enjoy the relatively cool morning before the sun started hammering down. There the children discovered to their delight that Andrea had in fact made several pies. Lily's son and daughter proceeded to devour one fig pie each. Ban licked the ceramic plate clean and looked longingly at the rest of the deserts. John's human family gratefully received the news that their home had survived relatively intact, and Albert seemed particularly pleased that Horace had survived.

"Hah, he's a good man. I'm glad he had the sense to go back to the house. I can't imagine having to leave your family in the city with the way you describe it."

Albert and Gregory quickly began comparing notes, deciding how much funding was available to rebuild the damage to the estate. John piped up to inform them that he was sure they could pay for arrangements, but both men overruled that decision. "We might be one of the few families left that can afford to take care of ourselves right now. Any gold you would send to us would be better spent elsewhere in the city."

Lily still felt strange around Johnathan's family. Even after their days spent together, and even with the humans' good-natured acceptance of John's changes. From the day that Johnathan had met her, their son and brother had been condemned for summoning demons, turned into a dragon, and disappeared for years across the world, with only correspondence as their link. Of course Lily had not convinced John to summon a demon, hadn't intended to turn him into a dragon, and had offered him the choice to return whenever he wanted. Despite that the dragoness couldn't help but feel a lingering anxiety around them. She had fortunately managed to hide it from John, but she wondered what his family actually thought of her. At least with her husband and children around her she could manage to push aside that anxiety and join in the lighthearted conversation as it continued.

"Honestly, living among humans all this time it never really occurred to me

that dragons would have their own culture and way of life." John was explaining how he had actually enjoyed the company of the other dragons that had guarded him. "I had no idea that Lily's title among dragons was a title of respect, and not authority. Or that dragons have no institutions of marriage. Which I suppose makes sense in a way. It must be a much bigger choice to commit your life to someone, when that life is so very long." He grinned at her like a love-struck dope. Lily returned the smile with hardly a care.

"Did they ever explain why the rest are so much smaller than you two?" Gregory asked curiously, absently shifting his plate to keep Ban from snatching the slice of pie he hadn't finished. "I mean, no offense my Lady, but you and John are almost too big." It was true that the two adults had been forced to sit in the sand out in front of the patio. Lily wanted to avoid changing her shape or size as much as possible at this point in her pregnancy. The chances were low of the spells harming her children, but there was no reason to risk it.

"Well, I'm this large because I am an elder, and from the royal bloodline. I would assume Johnathan is roughly the same size because it was my spell that transformed him."

They continued on this way for a while, until new arrivals on the beach brought an awkward silence with them. Hildi Falthwain and her children made a distant path over the sand to the water's edge, setting up a small canopy and a blanket. The group of them looked downcast, exhausted and limp. They hadn't shown any reservations to switching to the local garb of lightweight cotton or linen, forgoing the many layers they would have worn at home. Perhaps they had grown tired of the heat already, or maybe their pride was so lost that they didn't care about wearing what others might call indecent. Maybe they just wanted to blend in and forget who they were. Whichever reason, they cut a sad contrast to the wrights, still stubbornly wearing their foreign finery. Lily eventually had to tear her eyes away from the family to avoid being rude.

It had taken her days to admit it to herself, but the dragoness knew why she was so bothered by their presence. At their core, Hershel and her were not so

different. They had each done terrible things for a cause they felt was worthy. Hershel Falthwain had sacrificed a great many people in a failed attempt to save a city and nation that he thought were dying. In her past, Lililethan had nearly annihilated an entire empire to stomp out the vast demonic corruption that had gripped it. Perhaps her cause had been more pure, but her balance of death and suffering was innumerably higher. And yet she had killed Hershel almost on instinct, where she herself had escaped the revenge of thousands that must surely have wished for her death. Despite what she had told John last night, the presence of the northern family brought her own misdeeds far too close to the surface for comfort. She was nearly about to ask the Wrights if they felt like retiring to their home on the bluffs above when something curious happened.

Laurelie uncoiled herself from beneath Andrea's chair and padded off the patio, out onto the beach. Lily watched her daughter as she approached the Falthwains. The little red-striped dragoness honed in on where Hildi's daughter, Anita, sat alone in the sand, staring numbly out at the sea. Laurelie, still in her normal, panther-sized body, plopped down in the sand a few feet away. Lily couldn't hear what they said over the waves at this distance, but after a moment Anita stood, walked the few steps to Laurelie, and plopped down once more in the sand, leaning against the young dragon's side. Laurelie lay down and shaded the human child with a wing. Lily looked over to meet Hildi's eyes. Neither mother moved to separate the two. After a few moments Banzhrakin noticed his sister's absence and went to join her, his approach drawing out the other Falthwain children.

John and his family watched in silence with her as the group of six children, human and dragon, sat together on the beach, talking quietly to each other and building piles and crude castles in the wet sand.

"Do you think we might offer them some pie and tea?" Andrea asked quietly.

"That would be very kind of you Andrea." Lily murmured to the woman. She was tempted to go down with Andrea as she walked across the beach with a large serving platter and pitcher. But she couldn't bring herself to intrude on Hildi. The woman hadn't been there for her husband's execution; it

wouldn't have been safe for her family out in that angry crowd. But she must surely have heard the stories by now. She must know how Hershel had died, and she knew Lily had done it. The northern woman gratefully accepted the offering of food and drink, and passed it out to her children. Ban had the good manners not to attempt to steal any of the human's pie.

The dragoness made her decision, waved down one of the guards and requested he send a runner and assemble a crew. They had two more days before they were due back to meet with the other elders in Syrsarun; she planned on enjoying them if she could. Soon her people arrived on the beach with more pavilions and lightweight wooden tables. Food and drinks were laid out; Lily and the Wrights relocated under the shade of the cloth. Eventually Hildi joined them under the canopy, still keeping a distance, but at least partaking in the food that was laid out. The morning wore into afternoon, and the day became hot. It nearly took an outright order, but Lily finally managed to convince the Wrights to return to the bungalow to change into some of the clothes that had been provided, or at least shed some layers. She would not have her husband's family passing out from heatstroke because they were too stubborn to adapt.

More people arrived. Leroy and Maribel first. The ex-knight walked proudly on his new leg, a clever thing of carefully articulated steel and and copper. Some more of the extended Falthwains as well, with their own children that cautiously approached the gaggle on the beach. More of the mages that had survived the battle of Pastock joined them bearing more drink and food. Lily abstained, she was with child after all, but many others eagerly sipped on chilled fruit-wine. Even John commandeered a keg of it for himself. Soon the gathering was feeling quite cheerful, if not entirely festive. It had been unexpected, but it was a welcome distraction. Before Lily knew it, the afternoon had started fading into evening. Some of the guards and guests departed as the sun fell from the sky, Albert and Victoria included. Albert at least was in good cheer, but obviously overcome from the wine and heat. Victoria was forcing him to drink water as they returned to the bungalow.

Maribel and Leroy gathered the help of some of the other mages to collect driftwood. They started a bonfire so that the gathering could continue into the

night, and the gathered humans and dragons slowly formed a wide circle around the light of the fire. Ban and Laurelie, full of food and tired from play, curled up between Johnathan and herself. Hildi's children similarly huddled up with her, on the opposite side of the bonfire. Andrea and Gregory sat near John, the three siblings speaking of memories from home. Lily felt almost comfortable; the mood was light and so far there had been no displays of enmity. At least, she was comfortable until the conversation began to turn to more loaded topic. The majority of those present had been in the fighting, and soon they were swapping bittersweet tales of those lost or left behind.

"No, I swear!" Maribel laughed, leaning heavily on Leroy's shoulder as she sipped from a clay mug. "He came out to the gate as we were arriving, pulled me aside. He gets this big smile and says 'Might want to hold off. The queen and her man are shaggin' back there.'" There was a chorus of laughter from the gathered soldiers and veterans. Lililethan pretended to be offended, even though most of her people were well aware of her proclivities.

"Dad, what's shaggin?" Ban's urgent question broke into the silence. Maribel coughed into her cup and suddenly looked apologetic as Lily glared at her.

"It's a type of carpet, dear." John said firmly. Another round of laughter rippled through the assembly. Even Hildi was faintly smiling. The laughter trailed off slowly. One by one smiles faded as men and women became lost in their own thoughts. The inevitable recollection that the man they spoke about was dead set in, and the mood quickly swung somber.

It was John that spoke next. "I didn't know him as well as I should have." He admitted into the silence. Lily watched him carefully. A keg of wine wouldn't be enough to get him drunk, but it might have been enough to stir up unpleasant memories.

"I wish we could have given more of those men proper funerals." Leroy said sadly. "There were far fewer bodies than there were dead." He didn't have to add that it had been John's fires that had consumed most of the bodies. There was another painful stretch of silence. Once again John was the one to break it.

When Lily heard her husband begin to speak the opening words to a song, she looked at him in surprise. John had hummed and sung playfully for her before, but as his voice rang out deep and rich and haunting, it shocked her. Then, as the humans joined him one by one, and the words sank it, she had to swallow a tightness in her throat. They were singing an elegy. Lily didn't know the words, and could only listen.

"*Rest your heads, my weary brothers.*

Your souls and sins made pure,

With tears of weeping mothers.

For you no more battles await,

So set aside your broken blades.

Walk firm and without fear,

And step through the open gates.

Our voices will carry you beyond,

To the eternal peaceful glades.

Today we lay you in this earthen hollow.

But you will not lie in shadow,

We carry your name into the dawn.

Guided by our love for you,

Tomorrow we will follow.

When our time is through,

This path we will follow."

They repeated the last line like a chant, before Johnathan's resonant tones faded into the night, leaving only the crackle of the fire and the faint sounds of people choking back their tears. Lily felt her own eyes mist as she absorbed the defiant irony of praising the dead, while admitting their own mortality. It was a distinctly human experience.

Maribel stood and dragged her hand across her eyes before tipping a measure of her drink onto the white sand. The red wine looked far too much like blood in the dark. "For Tobias."

Each human repeated the motion around the circle. Standing and pouring a toast, the name of someone lost on their lips. And then it was Lily's turn. "For Hershel." She mumbled. All eyes turned to her.

The dragoness swallowed, suddenly feeling uncharacteristically awkward. "He may have done evil things, but he wasn't an evil person."

Whatever the man had done, she couldn't believe that he was wholly wicked. If he was, than what did that mean for her? "I think if things had been different, he could have been a great man. I wish things had been different."

The sentiment felt lame, and weak. The dragoness almost wished she hadn't spoken at all. And then she looked up to see Hildi giving her a sad smile. Slowly, the woman tipped her own glass, spilling one more stream of blood-red wine onto the beach. Forgiveness was not an emotion that came easily to dragons. A betrayal, or a murder, might be remembered for centuries. It was something that Lily was not fully prepared for, and as she watched Hildi set down her glass and hug her four children tightly, she somehow felt as though much more than one death had been forgiven.

Lililethan had been wrong. Perhaps it was not revenge that was a great, curious mystery. Instead, it was mercy.

The Calm

Lily did not feel ready for the day ahead, as their scheduled trip to Syrsarun arrived. The past few days had been a much needed break after the strife and grief of the months before; it almost felt like life was returning to normal. After the cathartic and impromptu memorial on the beach, the Falthwains appeared to have taken heart and started settling into their new home in earnest. Many members of the family had already taken jobs around the city, and Hildi had brought her children down to the shore every day to play with Ban and Laurelie. The two young dragons had been thrilled to have other children around, human or not. Even John's recalcitrant brother had opened up somewhat, and the Wrights were making plans to return home. But the consequences of the demonic attack were not quite finished. Lily had requested a council of elders in Syrsarun to discuss the demon's intense interest in her husband's transformation, and find out what they could hopefully do about it. Now she and her family stood once more before the gateway, waiting for the copper frame to gather enough latent energy to safely teleport the four of them.

Ban and Laurelie were justifiably excited, resting idly atop their father's back. Even John seemed to be looking forwards to the trip. Lily would be subjected to every grueling minute of council deliberations, but her husband and children had plenty of leisure time ahead of them to explore the wonders of Syrsarun. John had done his best to comfort and reassure her,which she appreciated, but even her husband couldn't quite grasp how much she hated being in that city. The negative emotions and memories she associated with that place were embedded bone deep in the dragoness. There was no avoiding it though, and she finally took one last fortifying breath before reaching out with a spell to trigger the gateway. The ripping-buzzing sound of the portal opening was familiar by now. It stabilized to reveal the view of the grand plateau of the same mountain terrace they had left from a week ago. It was raining there, the feeble blue-gray light and scent of petrichor filtering through to their side.

It was immediately obvious that the arrival platform was more crowded than it had been when they'd left. The convening of the full council was rare,

and each elder would have brought along their own circle of influence, along with any hangers on that might be curious. Several dragons nearest the gate turned to watch them as they stepped through, and then stepped out of the way to make room for Lily and John to weave their way through the crowd. There was a common agreement that the formalities usually offered to elders would be suspended here, it was understood that it was for everyone's best interest to get Elders out of the room quickly, considering how much space they took up. There was a shift in the tone of the murmuring chatter around the room as others took note of her and Johnathan, but otherwise Lily received only polite nods and murmured greetings as she led her family across the vestibule and down into the cavernous, subterranean city.

They didn't have far to go down the ramp before turning off. The Sanjeia residence took up an entire floor very near the peak of the mountain; it was a sprawling complex of private rooms, capable of hosting nearly the entire Sanjeia family. As far as Lily knew, the clan residence should be empty; none of the rest of her family planned on being in attendance at the council. Probably for the best. The noise of the ramp faded behind them as John followed her down a long, elaborately painted hallway, until the hallway had looped back around on itself and opened into a large oval foyer, painted brightly in green and gold. At the far end of the room, just in front of the archway into the residence, there was a young robin-blue dragoness standing at a stiff position of attention. Not even her eyes moved as Lily guided her family into the foyer. The seven major families frequently assigned or accepted younger females to inter-clan postings, and Sanjeia was no exception. At one point in time, Lily would have been able to determine not only this dragoness's family, but her bloodline and parents. Now she simply smiled and nodded. "Hello. You must be our assigned steward."

The dragoness bowed deeply before speaking, "Yes, Eldest Lililethan. I am Zieadasra, of Clan Arsothsk." Zieadasra held the bow for a moment before standing and turning to John and his passengers. "Welcome, clan-mate Johnathanwright, and scions Banzhrakin, Laurelie." She pronounced John's name all jammed together, so that it sounded more like Jaanitinrie. John smiled blankly upon hearing his name, and the children didn't even seem to notice. Lily had forgotten for a moment that none of them spoke the language. "I have been assigned by my eldest to assist you during your stay

here in Syrsarun." Her voice was crisp and bright with excitement despite her rigid pose. She was young enough it was likely her first assignment.

"Thank you Zieadasra. I'm sure you've been told of my reputation and what to expect here. I don't hold much to ceremony, so you can relax when no one else is around. I'm not going to send you back to your family for breaches of etiquette."

The blue dragoness looked nervously at Lily for a minute before visibly relaxing. "Of course, Eldest."

"Could you please show us inside please? I'm going to need to find some interpreters for my husband and children." Zieadasra bowed, and led the way through the arch. Lily followed politely, even though she knew where they were headed. The family residence was as ostentatious and pretentious as ever. Murals of the more famous exploits and members of the family adorned every wall and ceiling. The lighting was not simple colored glass orbs, but elaborately branching crystals. Human-wrought sculptures and statues, along with captured arms and armor, rested on tables and pedestals in nearly every room. It may have been decades since the last time she was here, but Lily still knew the layout of the place, and quickly located the vast storeroom filled with various magical trinkets. The interpreters were little more than a diadem suspended on a chain between two loops. Zieadasra watched as Lily handed one each to her husband and children.

"Here John, the loops slide over your horns. It does a bit of mental trickery to let you understand and speak the local language. Don't wear them for more than eightish hours at a time though, or they'll start to mess with your memory of your own language."

Her husband nodded, and slipped the thing onto his head. Lily helped Ban and Laurelie, still seated atop his back.

"Okay, is it working?" It was. John's voice came out in the rapid sibilant words of the draconic language, even if he didn't notice. They weren't perfect, and some words didn't have direct translations, but it worked well enough.

"Yes clan-mate." Zieadasra confirmed, before Lily could.

"Oh!" John looked over at the dragoness. "Thank you."

Lily gave John a quick kiss on the cheek, "They're not perfect, but they should do for now." She smiled. "I'll have to leave you in Zieadasra's capable hands; I have to get ready for the opening ceremony of the council."

She turned to the younger dragoness, "Zieadasra, please take care of my family while I'm gone. Johnathan is not familiar with the city, so help make sure he doesn't step on anyone's tail if you're out and about. You should show him the creche, I'm sure the children would love to see it."

"As you wish, Eldest Lililethan."

"Take care, love." John mumbled to her before giving her one last parting kiss, his lips and tongue lingering on hers.

"Mom! Dad! That's gross!" Ban snapped angrily from his position on John's neck.

Reluctantly, she broke away. "Gotta go John, but I'll be back tonight to follow up on this."

He grinned against her lips, "I'll hold you to that."

Lily lifted her head to give Ban and Laurelie a quick flick of her tongue across their heads.

"Mom! Stop!"

"Behave for your father. I'll see you later tonight." With one last longing glance over her shoulder, Lily left them with the steward. The central shaft into the mountain was busy, and her descent down slowed by the constant polite greetings from other dragons. It took nearly an hour for her to reach the lowest levels. The council met outdoors, in a large amphitheater built into the base of the mountain, surrounded by the towering forest. Rain pattered down

onto the assembled dragons, giving a rather melancholy mood to the amphitheater. It was a vast open-air thing, built to accommodate not only the eldest dragons of the seven major families, but a large gallery of observers as well. The central platform of the arena was marked off with seven different divisions, each one marked with the crest and colors of a specific bloodline. Three of the seven partitions were already occupied by other matriarchs, three dragonesses nearly as large as Lily herself. Lililethan headed towards the spot where a green and gold striped banner hung to represent the royal line: hers.

Lililethan sat, and studied the other elders already assembled. Politics here tended to involve less sabotage and backstabbing than what she'd seen among humans, but that didn't mean it was a tea party. At least two of the elders here didn't like her, or didn't like her clan. It had been so long since she had dealt with the rest that she wasn't sure what to expect. While her family was technically the most powerful and prestigious, all of the elders here were sovereign unto themselves, and to accomplish her goals, she would have to convince at least three of them to work with her. Thus, a council meeting was a delicate balancing act of interests and personalities; all structured by a formal process that had been used since time immemorial.

Lily sat quietly, and tried to observe small important details. Every little social interaction provided a clue to a larger context. Who had arrived before her was important, who was late was important, who was speaking to who was important. It was exhausting. She was also the only dragon in attendance that wasn't accompanied by at least a few junior members of her family, so she had only her own eyes and wits to go on. Over the course of the next hour, the last few elders filtered in, along with a few more spectators. She had taken some time to update herself on the different associations and rivalries between the clans, though they hadn't changed much since she'd left Syrsarun, so long ago. She recalled what she knew as she watched the last elders seat themselves.

Kyrenic of Arsothsk, Zieadasra's clan. Their elder was a large male, of the same sky black speckled blue scales. Likely one of Zieadasra's direct relatives. The male was the the second youngest elder on the council, but his clan was among the largest. They had fairly good relations with Sanjeia.

Raszeics of Clan Kamvra. The second of two males on the council, and the youngest elder in the gathering. Raszeics was huge, easily as large as Lily, despite being younger. His brother had been even larger. The green-banded black scaled male stared at Lily with open contempt. Kamvra and Sanjeia didn't have any particular relations at all, primarily due to the fact that Raszeics blamed Lily for the death of his brother, who would otherwise be sitting in his place.

The next three elders usually worked as a block, their clans being fairly closely related. Alalirrel of Clan Hata, Ithelashri of Clan Siedkess, and Ietrithala of Clan Karcaith. The three matriarchs sat forwards in their partitions, more focused on each other than on Lily or the council. Alalirrel was a bright, almost cherry red dragoness, with a white underbelly and throat. Ithelashri was a solid green like Lily, although her scales were darker and less vibrant. Ietrithala looked like a ribbon of gold. She was long, and almost sickly thing, but her scales flowed very much like polished metal. Like Arsothsk, the three clans were helpful, or at least ambivalent towards Sanjeia.

The final elder was perhaps the one that disliked Lily most of all. Yedanathil of Clan Ilikess, lay in her partition like a cloud, her large, almost fat, frame and pure white scales making a convincing disguise. Clan Ilikess had been formed out of bad blood with Clan Sanjeia, and they hadn't ever reconciled. Yedanathil specifically hated that there even was a royal bloodline, as limited as it was. Since Lililethan was the eldest of her clan, and one of the last members of the royal bloodline, that hatred extended to her. The chubby white dragoness hated that there was someone with even the tiniest iota more power and authority than her.

Finally, when the last of the elders had settled down and the chatter of the spectators had hushed expectantly, Lily approached the rostrum in the center of the arena. "Welcome, sovereign elders. As the principal for this council, I would like to thank you all for attending. If there are no objections, I will declare this council open for deliberations. We will start with the formal introductions. Elder Alalirrel of Clan Hata," Lililethan turned to face the red dragoness. "Would you please approach the rostrum?" It was traditional for introductions to be made in descending order of age, with Lililethan going first and Yedanathil next, but Yedanathil was never going to cooperate. If

Lily remembered correctly, clan Hata and Clan Ilikess were still at odds with each other. Since she had sacrificed her own option to go first, Yedanathil couldn't really complain about Lily changing the order, and maybe Alalirrel would enjoy being able to snub the older white dragoness. As Alalirrel mounted the rostrum and began to speak, Lily settled back into her partition to wait.

The creche was certainly a sight to behold. It was another massive circular domed room, like nearly every other room in this place, but the entire floor of the cavern was a deep pool of crystal blue water, with only a ring of solid stone around the perimeter. Columns of stone rose out of the water in a random fashion towards the ceiling. Each of the columns had various ledges and walkways jutting out of them, so that a web connected them all together. Dozens of slides descended in spirals down into the pool, each of them was lined with smooth ceramic tile with a constant gush of water running over them. The spray of mist from all the rushing water caught the light from the globes studding the ceiling, so that in practically every direction John looked he saw ephemeral rainbows hanging in the vapor.

Dozens of young dragons climbed and swam in the room, their colors and shapes as varied as the adults John had seen on the ramp down. Their cheerful voices were just barely audible over the roar of falling water. He was hardly an expert on draconic children, but it struck him that many of the children seemed younger than his son and daughter. Not just for their smaller size, but from the poorly defined patterns of their scales and slightly rounder, chubbier bodies. Zieadasra halted outside of the room, waiting respectfully as John carried his children inside. Ban and Laurelie were practically vibrating with eagerness, dancing across his back with the restrained desire to charge into the pool.

"Good day." John started as a smaller dragon spoke behind him. The dragon wore a strange black sash that looped around his neck and down his shoulder like a scarf. He hadn't even noticed the handful of adults scattered around the perimeter of the room, all of their eyes focused intently on the playing children. One of them had approached John, looking at him expectantly as he spoke. "You are here to drop off these children?"

"I am." John replied, scanning the other adults. They all seemed to be wearing that sash, and all seemed to be younger males. It made sense he supposed, from what he'd learned over the last week from their guests. Due to the imbalance in the population of genders among dragons, the males tended to do most of the utilitarian work, while females tended to be groomed for leadership. As age denoted authority here, most of the more mundane and routine roles would be filled with young male dragons.

"Are they your own, or are you a caretaker for another?"

"They're mine." He said proudly, tilting his head back to grin at Ban and Laurelie. The guardian smiled politely.

"Excellent. Please come this way and sign them in." Unfortunately the translator didn't do anything for written words; the jagged edged scribbles on the page made absolutely no sense to John.

"I'm sorry, I can't read this."

The other dragon tilted his head quizzically, then gave John a quick glance up and down. "Oh, you are Matriarch Lililethan's clan-mate! I apologize, I should have recognized you. We were told you might be coming, allow me to assist you." With the guardian's help, John filled out Ban and Laurelie's names, and then signed. "Very good. Protocol requires that you return to pick them up within three hours. If you are not, a mark will be made against your record here and your visiting privileges will be suspended."

"Oh." John blinked. "Okay." He hadn't intended to leave at all, but looking around he saw no other parents. Was he not supposed to stay? How was he expected to keep track of the time? There were no clocks in this place. He looked over his shoulder at the children. "Are you two going to be all right here alone?"

"Yeah dad, can we go? Please?" Ban wasn't even looking at him; his son had his eyes fixed on the tallest slide in the center of the room.

"All right, I'll be back soon." John chuckled as the two leapt from his back and plowed heedlessly into the water. They were soon climbing the closest pillar, rushing to join the other children clambering over the playground. John watched for a minute before the guardian shifted uncomfortably and looked pointedly at the door. No, apparently he was not supposed to stay. He rejoined Zieadasra in the hallway and left the creche behind.

"Zieadasra, why do they shoo all the parents out of the creche?" John tried to lean in close enough to whisper discreetly, only to have Zieadasra lean away and speak aloud.

"The purpose of the creche is to teach young dragons to develop their social skills independently, without interference from adults. All interactions and conflicts are allowed to proceed naturally unless there appears to be a risk of physical danger." It made sense, but the way she explained it was far too clinical, as though she'd read it from a book. Which she probably had, he supposed. "Do not worry Jaanitinrie, the watchers are extremely diligent in their task. There has not been a serious injury in the creche for decades."

He sighed. Lily had trusted the place, so he would as well. "You can just call me John. I suppose we'd better find something to do for an hour or two. Do you have any museums here?"

Zieadasra gave him a sidelong glance. "Of course clan-mate Jaanitinrie," She ignored his request. "We have several. The most famous of them is dedicated to Lililethan's own clan. Shall I show you?" He nodded his assent, and followed the smaller dragoness as she led him through the bowels of the mountain city. They passed other dragons as they went; and John couldn't help but wonder how many actually lived here. It seemed crowded, but much of that was just because dragons took up much more space. In reality, he couldn't imagine there were more than one or two thousand from what he'd seen. Maybe not even that. Every so often one of the dragons they passed would recognize John or Zieadasra and stop to greet them. Each time Zieadasra encountered such in interaction, it seemed to flow like clockwork. There was a nearly identical salutation from each new dragon: "Greetings scion Zieadasra, of clan Arsothsk, I hope the day finds you well."

And a nearly identical reply, "It does, thank you so-and-so from clan such-and-such." The only variation being the names of the individuals and the clans. And Zieadasra seemed to know everyone.

Every time John ran into someone who recognized him however, he struggled to match the ceremonial exchange. "Welcome back to Syrsarun, clan-mate Jaanitinrie, I hope the day finds you well," a random dragon would say with a carefully measured shallow bow.

"Oh, thank you. You too." He would reply with a sloppy bob of his neck that always felt like too much or too little. None of the dragons seemed particularly upset by his fumbling responses, but Zieadasra seemed more and more agitated with each exchange.

When they'd finally reached the museum, John couldn't help but feel relieved at its lack of patrons, if only for the fact that he could get away from the formalized greeting. "Zieadasra, what exactly is a clan-mate? Is it anything like a husband?"

"No, not really." The dragoness provided bluntly. After a moment, she finally clarified her statement. "It simply denotes that you are currently affiliated with Eldest Lililethan's clan. Any male that fathers children outside of his own clan is under the dual authority of both his own Eldest, and that of the mother's until the children reach the age of their majority."

"That sounds...complicated."

He got the distinct feeling that he had stated something obvious by the way she looked up at the ceiling. "Yes, it is why mating between clans is somewhat limited. Split loyalties can be difficult. Fortunately, as you have no Eldest of your own to answer to, and Lililethan is the eldest of her clan, you only have her to answer to."

He couldn't help feeling a little bit smug at her assumption. 'Answer to' wasn't exactly the phrase he would use. Lily may have been a queen and an eldest and whatever else, but outside of politics she had always treated him as a partner and not a subject. Still, he could play the part for this visit. "And

what about scion? Is that a specific title as well?"

Zieadasra took a deep breath before speaking. John got the distinct impression that she didn't like answering questions. "Scion is any direct descendant of a current elder. My great-grandfather is elder of Clan Arsothsk."

John nodded, and swallowed the rest of his questions. Maybe he could catch her in a better mood, or ask Lily later. He turned his attention to the museum. Unlike the museums in Pastock that he'd visited as a child, this one had few artifacts or exhibits. Instead the dragons showed their history through the murals painted along the walls. Almost lifelike scenes of past people or events were painted on every surface, and large stone tablets were displayed, their faces carved in massive blocks of text that John couldn't decipher. Still, the paintings themselves were interesting, and Zieadasra actually seemed happy to read the information to him. They passed by depictions of the first construction of Syrsarun, and of famous members of Lily's family, and finally came to a vast family tree.

John had to stop and marvel at the incredible detail of the branching painting. Apparently, dragons took their genealogy seriously. Thousands of individual dragons were recorded, over dozens of generations. There was a single bloodline of the family highlighted in a green and gold background, leading all the way from the beginning of the Sanjeia clan, to the very end, where there was a painting of a familiar dragoness as a child. It was impossible for John to mistake the emerald scales and verdigris eyes of his wife, even depicted so young. Especially when there were no other dragons of quote so lovely a shade of green on the tree. There was a rough outline of three new dragons around Lily, linked by faint lines to her. Apparently the artists had already started adding John and their children.

"Lily was adorable as a baby." He joked.

"Indeed, *Lililethan* has always been impressive." John couldn't miss her emphasizing Lily's full name. At the same time, he didn't particularly care.

"So, maybe you can clear something up for me, I've heard others say that

Lily's clan is royalty here, but also that all of the elders are essentially queens or kings of their own clan."

"Lililethan's *bloodline* is royal." Zieadasra corrected him. "The Sanjeia clan is named after the Sanjeia bloodline. They were the first dragons to form an organized society, and they carved the first tunnels of Syrsarun. Over the millennia, all other clans formed from splits in the Sanjeia family. In times of war, or calamity, the royal bloodline can assume control of the council, in order to make tactical decisions more quickly. That is why Lililethan is called Queen."

"Ah." John nodded, and examined the family tree more closely. He noticed a distinct pruning of Lily's direct relatives. The majority of the individuals that were backed by green and gold seemed to have no continuation to their lines, and many of the dragons at this end had a single small rune painted beneath them, including Lily's brother, their son's namesake. The elder Banzhrakin was a much darker green, bulkier and larger than Lily. It didn't take John long to realize what the rune meant.

"All of these dragons died, didn't they?"

Zieadasra nodded solemnly, and nodded her head towards a large gallery at the end of the current hallway. John followed her in, and temporarily stood in shock at the violent images painted across the walls here. Scenes of dragons flying in formations, breathing fire down upon armies or ruined cities. Scenes of dragons locked in bloody melee with twisted demonic monstrosities.

Unable to read the tablets, he listed instead to Zieadasra. "Clan Sanjeia suffered heavy losses in the great war. The royal bloodline, being among the largest and most powerful, insisted on fighting at the front, to protect others."

John's eyes stopped as he came to another image of his wife, standing victoriously over a field of fallen men and demons, side by side with an unbelievably large black dragon. The male was huge, dwarfing even Lily. Green bands wrapped around his body, and the expression he was painted with made him look like he could chew up boulders for breakfast. From the rest of the museum, John got the impression that the artists here hadn't tended

to exaggerate; the dragon was probably really just that big.

"Irsasz." Zieadasra said softly, nodding to the painting of the black dragon. "As two of the most powerful dragons, they were a natural match. Their elders had decided that Irsasz would give Lililethan her first children, but he fell in battle before-."

"I think," John spoke up to interrupt her, "that if I'm going to hear about him, I'd prefer to hear it from my wife." Lily had told him a little about her past relationships. She had tried to be as honest about her past as she could with him, but John had heard the pain in her voice when has mentioned Irsasz name to him, and he hadn't pressed her on it since. Now John felt like he was prying, seeing something he shouldn't. Lily had only been with him a fraction of the time she'd been alone after the war, and if it took her years or decades to feel comfortable talking about lost loves, he was willing to wait.

"Do you know how long we've been gone? Maybe we should head back and check on the children."

Lily took the long flight around the mountain rather than deal with any more interactions traveling through it. The formal introductions and exchanges of greetings among the elders had filled the entire day. It wasn't the longest she'd seen it take, but it certainly wasn't the shortest either. Hours of banal lists of achievements and honors, and ritualistic conversations as the elders played out the traditional opening steps of the council. Half of the other elders seemed eager to get on with the things, but Yedanathil and Rasceics had been fully willing to drag out the introductions. It had been so many years that she'd actually had to deal with them that she'd forgotten some of the petty delaying tactics that they could use. She managed to work out some of her anger with a furious flight around the mountain, her wings burning with exertion as she made record time back to her home. By the time she landed outside on the terrace, she was more exhausted than annoyed. A loud burst of childish laughter from deeper in the house eased her further, and she tried to shrug off her frown as she stepped inside.

John was on his back in one of the sand pits, flopping around in feigned

helplessness and clawing the air as Ban and Laurelie worked together to try pinning his head down. The two were giggling hysterically as John occasionally thrashed his neck with just enough force to toss one of them off. Their temporary steward, Zieadasra, was laying down nearby, her attention unfocused. The young dragoness looked somewhat frazzled. Belatedly noticing Lily's entrance, Zieadasra jerked upright, and quickly dropped into a bow. "Welcome home Eldest."

"Relax, Zieadasra. I've had enough formality for the day." Lily sighed softly. Zieadasra hesitated, and stood up in a more relaxed posture, her face carefully blank.

Ban and Laurelie noticed her finally, and called for their mother's aid. "Mom! Help us!" Laurelie squealed, even as John gave a shake of his head that sent her tumbling into the sand. Lily couldn't resist, and charged to her daughter's rescue. John gave an honest grunt as she flopped down on top of him, her front paws pinning his to the sand. She grinned down at her husband as their children cheered.

"Yeah! We got you dad!" Ban taunted, prancing around in a victory loop.

Lily watched a sly smirk spread across her husband's face, and a moment later she felt his tail twitch out, tripping the younger dragon so that he sprawled on his side. Before Ban could get back up, John was prodding him in the ribs with the tip of his tail, tickling the young dragon mercilessly.

"I've still got a few tricks." John growled playfully, giving a few last pokes as their son squealed and thrashed at the tail. Finally the two children calmed down, panting and happy.

"Mom!" Laurelie hopped up and put her paws on her mother's nose, "We went to this place today, cretch! Have you been there?"

"I have. Did you like the slides?"

"Yeah! They were all wet, and you can slide down so fast!"

"I did a cannonball!" Ban struggled tiredly to his feet, still winded from the tickling. On one of their many days spent at the beach, John had shown their son how to curl himself up and plow into the water with an enormous splash. "No one there saw a cannonball 'fore, and they all started doing it."

"There were so many kids, mom!" Laurelie gingerly climbed up on top of her father's chest, trying to draw attention back to herself. "They were small, but not as small as Nita."

"I worried that they might be too old for the creche, but the guardians there were quite impressed by how gentle they were with the others." Zieadasra interjected tentatively. Ban and Laurelie smiled at the praise.

Lily grinned back at them, "That's wonderful. I'm glad you both had fun."

"Can we go again tomorrow mom?" Ban pleaded.

"That's up to your father, dear. I'm afraid I have to leave early for the council in the morning." Lily finally stepped off of her husband, allowing him to turn right-side up. Laurelie scrambled over John's shoulder as he rolled, so that she ended up on his back.

"Ah, then I guess we probably shouldn't stay up too late. Have you eaten yet? Zieadasra had someone bring up supper just a bit ago." He rumbled, shaking loose sand from each of his legs in turn.

Lily gratefully followed her husband to where dinner had been set up around a low, dragon-sized table. There had been no break in the deliberations for her to get any food in her belly, and with two young dragons growing inside of her, she felt ravenous. Dinner was a large pot of thick stew, heavily laden with beef, vegetables, and noodles in a spicy broth. It was delicious. Lililethan devoured the food as John and the children sat with her and continued to recount their day, having already eaten. Zieadasra stood stiffly outside the room, as was customary for a steward, until John waved her over to join them. A steward was neither a guest, nor family, and joining them at their table was unheard of, but at John's insistence, she sat entered the room and stood awkwardly at the far side of the table.

"Zieadasra was a very helpful guide today." John said generously, "I'm pretty sure I would still be lost down in the lower levels without her."

The young dragoness, already uncomfortable with the many breaches of etiquette, looked positively miserable at the praise. "I was simply doing what is required by my position as your steward."

Lily was partly amused by the steward's discomfort, but realized perhaps her husband was pushing the young dragoness too far. It was obvious that Zieadasra was fully immersed in the social niceties here. John's oblivious shattering of all of of those norms could easily be rubbing her the wrong way. Lily decided to intervene before the dragoness got too upset. "Zieadasra, we'll probably be retiring for the night shortly, if you'd like to return home for the day."

Their steward nodded with immediate relief and stood, offering John and the children a polite bow before turning to Lily, "Eldest Lililethan, may I speak to you privately before I leave?"

Lililethan suppressed her annoyance. The sky blue dragoness must be highly upset to interrupt an elder's meal. "Be right back." She mumbled to John, and stood to follow the steward out of the room. Zieadasra only barely waited until they were out of ear shot before turning to her host.

"Eldest, I realize that I have been granted a great honor in this position, and this is highly irregular, but may I ask to be released from this service to you?"

Lily was honestly shocked. Resigning from this task would be a stain on the young dragoness's record regardless of what reasons she gave. Apparently this was more serious that she'd thought. "You are always free to leave, Zieadasra. But before you make that decision can I ask you what is wrong? I would hate for you to lose standing for something that we could correct."

"I don't want to offend you, Eldest."

"Don't worry about that. I am fairly understanding of the fact that my

husband and family are unusual here."

Zieadasra sighed, and then launched into a breathless explanation. "There are so many things, Eldest, I can't even list them all. I understand clan-mate Jaanitinrie is not from Syrsarun, but even a completely wild male dragon of his size and age should have better manners. He seems like he has a kind heart, but he has no filters or boundaries. He disrespectfully refuses to use your given name, he doesn't have any grasp on how to behave in public, he asks questions like a curious child, and the way he is raising your children is handicapping them for success if they should ever desire to return here. More than that, he seems to have no concept of propriety. The way he kept so close to me today, half of the dragons that saw us would assume we were lovers." Her eyes went wide as she continued. "He even asked me to shorten his name! I know that Jaanitinrie is a feminine name, but I will not call him by a pet name like we were mates!"

Despite herself, Lily did feel a bit insulted by the rant, but she took a breath and shoved it down. Zieadasra did not seem aware that John wasn't a dragon at all originally. Instead she focused on her amusement how repressed this place must actually be that her easily embarrassed husband was seen as wild. "I believe I can see the problem, and I apologize. I should have arrived earlier this morning, so that I could could offer more of an explanation and avoid this. You have heard the rumors about my husband?"

"I have heard several Eldest. I have heard that he is a wild dragon, raised in barbarous lands. I have heard that he is an outcast from another clan. I've even heard that he used to be a human, and was somehow transformed by demons."

Lily couldn't suppress a chuckle. Rumor mills were no more accurate among dragons than humans. "It wasn't demons, it was me. He was a man, and one of my spells accidentally made him a dragon."

Zieadasra shook her head, "Surely you are joking, Eldest?"

"No. My husband is as foreign here as foreign gets. He's asking questions because he wants to learn, he calls me Lily because I told him to, and if you

are worried about impropriety, just ask him if he's trying to flirt with you. I guarantee he will give you some distance. When you return in the morning, keep all that in mind, and explain to him if he does something that bothers you. He's a bit stubborn, but John is clever. He'll catch on quick." Lily's smile faded somewhat as she let a little of her ire seep into her voice. "As for our children, *I* made the choice to raise them among humans, because I don't like how it is done here. It may seem normal to you, but in my opinion, sending my children off to begin learning politics and civics before they have even learned to fly doesn't seem like good parenting."

"Of course, Eldest." Zieadasra bowed deeply in apology. "I meant no disrespect. I assumed that clan-mate John was the active parent, as you have duties to attend. I spoke in ignorance."

"It's fine." Lily shrugged her wings dismissively in pardon. "Now that this is cleared up would you still like to be excused from this duty?"

"I...I will return in the morning Eldest, and try and refrain from casting judgment so quickly."

"Good. Oh, by the way. He's probably asking you to shorten his name because you are mangling it horribly. It's not Jaanitinrie. It's Johnathan Wright. And I assure you it's a very masculine name in his homeland."

Zieadasra bowed once more, and departed with her new information. Lily was happy the young dragoness had changed her mind. Lily didn't want to hurt Zieadasra's reputation, and she also didn't want to deal with the setback it could cause dealing with her elder.

Ban and Laurelie were both yawning sleepily when Lily returned, tuckered out from their time at the creche and their earlier wrestling. John smiled at her as she came back into the room, "I don't think Zieadasra likes me very much." He whispered conspiratorially before raising his voice, "Ban, Laurelie, do you want to sleep in our room tonight, or separate?"

"Mom moves too much now. We want our own bed." Ban complained. Pregnancy had started to make Lily's sleep rather fitful, as she had a hard

time finding positions that didn't feel like one of her organs was being squished. Of course, that wasn't the only reason she was restless at night. Nightmares still lingered in her slumber, reminders of the stress of the last few months.

"Okay, why don't we go find you a room."

Lily and the children had stayed here before, when John was sleeping in the clinic. They had stayed in the elder's suite with her then, but this time Lily guided the tired children to a small room just down the hall, and she and John tucked them into the pile of blankets and cushions there, wishing them a good night before retreating into their own room. Lily gratefully slumped against John now that they were finally in privacy. "I can't wait for this to be over. I had started to forget exactly why I hated returning here, but today was a good reminder."

"Everything does seem a bit too stiff." John admitted. "But it's not all bad. I got to learn a bit more about this place and your family, and the children loved the creche. I think they would have stayed all day if the guards would let them." He wrapped one wing over her, supporting her towards the bed. "It was a fresh new experience at least."

She smiled as she let him lead her. The bed was a deep depression, filled up with cushions. A shelf stood around one half of the rim, providing some privacy from the door. The lighting controls and various trinkets stood along the shelves, many of them more or less untouched since Lily's last visit here, while John was recuperating. Her eyes glanced over a familiar pair of small concave discs, and she was struck by inspiration. "Speaking of new experiences, you said once that you wondered what it was like to be pregnant."

John followed her gaze, his icy blue eyes going wide as he spotted the discs they had last used at the Frostmire. There was a brief shiver of his frame against her; perhaps brought on the the last memorable experiment with the discs. "I suppose I did."

He gave her a smile, and padded across the bed to grab the enchanted

baubles. Lily put hers on, and after a moment John did the same. There was a brief moment of fuzziness as the magic overrode her senses, and then suddenly she was looking over at herself, watching her body move in ways that she wasn't guiding. The change in sensation was even more pronounced than the last time for the dragoness. Her pregnancy had progressed to the point that it was finally starting to cause mild discomforts. It wasn't as bad as it would or could get, but there was a definite pressure in her lower body that was suddenly absent in John's. When she pressed a hand to her middle there was no swell of new life, just the hard, scared scales and muscles of her husband. She noticed that her husband's form had a certain stiffness in some joints, aches and pains lingering still from his near-fatal injuries. Even the best magical healing in the world hadn't been able to completely restore him. Time and nature would have to do the rest.

"Lily!" Her own amazed voice drew her attention; John was practically doubled up on himself, both hands on her body's belly, staring down at it in wonder. "Lily, this is so bizarre! I can feel them!" He laughed, nearly toppling over on the bed.

"Don't get them too worked up John." Lily smiled as she watched her husband explore her body. "You start getting them excited and you're not likely to get much sleep tonight."

John nodded, then glanced up at her, "You want to sleep like this?"

"If you'd like. This is a good time, before things start to get more uncomfortable. I'm sure you remember the last time." Pregnancy was relatively easy for a dragoness Lily's size, at least compared to humans or smaller dragons. That didn't mean it wasn't without some difficulties though, especially carrying twins. Lily treasured every moment of carrying Ban and Laurelie, but the last few months had certainly been a test of how much inconvenience she could endure.

"Okay. I think I need to pee first though. It feels like my bladder is being squeezed."

Lily waited for John to relieve himself and come back to bed before she

dimmed the light-bearing crystal chandeliers. In the near-dark, she pulled John atop her, so that he was draped over her. It was a bit strange, since he was currently wearing her larger body, but he was happy to lay face to face with her, his head resting on her chest. Despite the aggravations of the day, or perhaps because of them, Lily soon found herself drifting, her eyes closing.

John didn't sleep right away. He couldn't. There was something so strange, and so strangely exhilarating about feeling the two new lives growing in his belly. Sure, it was disconcerting having what felt like two very sluggish snakes squirming around in his belly, but they were his *children*. He was experiencing what no father could ever hope to: carrying his own children. Sort of anyways. The body that actually held them was still the beautiful emerald form of his wife. But at least for right now, he was living in this body. One more novel event for an already eventful day. He felt Lily grow still against him, sleeping soundly in his form.

John was left laying awake as Lily drifted off below him. He wondered if there was anything he could do to help her sleep soundly tonight, after what was apparently an aggravating day. During his recovery, focusing on the healing magic that had been used on him had been one of his only distractions, and so he had managed to carefully analyze several of the spells, including the ones that had been used to help him sleep through the more painful portions. They were too risky to use on Lily in her own body, there was no telling how the alterations would affect her pregnancy, but they had already been used on him safely before. He carefully reproduced a much weaker version of the spell, nudging her into a deeper sleep. He couldn't risk messing with her too much, and he wished he knew more about healing magic, but the spell he was copying had come built in with safeguards, so that the effect failed if the body started rejecting it. The effect did not fail, and soon Lily was crooning in her sleep, twitching below him with what he hoped were pleasant dreams. Slowly, the rhythm of her rising and falling chest rocked him into a doze, the steady motions dulling John's thoughts, until he too could drift off.

Dreams came at him in the chaotic, unorganized way that they were wont to. He was standing outside the creche, all four of his children playing inside,

and Zieadasra standing at the door telling him parents weren't allowed in. Then he was standing over a burning Pastock, the sky black with smoke. He delicately held a spit of pork in his claws, turning it over the fire to cook. Finally his troubled dreams settled into something more peaceful. It was a figment of a familiar dream, floating with Lily over through an endless space, the two of them tangled up together. In his mind, they writhed against each other, their limbs tangled and grasping, their wings flared out to desperately cool their forms. John thrust against Lily, but something was different. Rather than the feeling of his shaft emerging from his slit, he felt sensitive, swollen lips down between his legs. A firm, heated rod was pressed between their bodies, but it wasn't John's. Instead Lily dragged her shaft along his body, the crown of it spitting out long lines of fluid over John's belly. The spiny ridges slid between the fold's of John's vent, pushing them aside as she teased him.

John's mind struggled to make sense of the scenario as Lily continued to thrust herself back and forth over his sex, setting him to squirming. Despite his mental confusion, his body was eager for more, and soon his hips were rolling back against her, trying to trip up her motions. It was only a matter of time before he succeeded, and as she pulled back, so did he. John lifted himself away from his wife just enough that the tip of her shaft slid down between his thighs, settling into his entrance. He trembled in her grip and she moved slowly into him. He didn't feel the familiar grip and heat around his maleness as he buried himself inside of her. Instead, his flesh parted, her cock wedging him open, sliding smoothly through his thoroughly slick vent. An intense heat and pressure surged in his loins as she lovingly sunk herself into him. John dropped until their scales met with a messy squelch, before pulling back up gently, so that her crown raked against his insides. He rode his wife through the bizarre dreamscape, lifting himself slowly and dropping back down with swift, firm impacts that sent his hips and thighs shaking.

Slowly he sped up his pace, his movements becoming sloppy and frantic, as confused as they were ardent. John accidentally lifted himself too far, letting Lily slide fully out of him, but he had already started to drop back down. The tapered crown of her shaft slid along the scales of his backside, leaving a clear, wet trail to where it settled in the tighter entrance of his rump. Momentum carried him through, and there was a very new sensation as he engulfed half her shaft in a single thrust.

John's eyes snapped open, the dream broken by the intense stretch of this new penetration. For a moment he was confused as he found himself staring at his own smiling face. Then he remembered the discs. The gaping, empty sensation of his sex and sheen of moisture spread along the scales of John's borrowed body let him know that the dream had been very real. That, and the rather large rod of pulsing, hot flesh currently lodged in his gut.

"Having fun there, love?" Lily teased, her adopted voice rumbling through his frame. She held him tightly to her chest, her arms wrapped around his neck in a loving embrace.

John panted, his body very excited in the aftermath of the dream, but he felt more than a little bashful about the current circumstances. Lily had put her tail in his rump before, and she had mated him the last time they switched bodies, but at the moment, his own very real, very hard cock was currently lodged halfway in his ass. Or Lily's ass. Whatever.

"I don't suppose you thought about waking me up before this point?" He grumbled. He was torn between wanting to give in to this body's needy demand to continue, and pulling himself off.

"Hey, you started it. I woke up hard as a rock an hour ago, and was just trying to relax and let it go away. You were the one that started grinding on me."

"Oh." An hour ago? John hadn't had an unwanted erection like that since he was a teenager. Sudden laughter rippled through him, as he realized what had likely happened. The movement caused his insides to clench around Lily's shaft, and he quickly wheezed off as she reflexively thrust a little deeper. "Ah, sorry. I think I just realized what happened."

She looked at him curiously, waiting for him to elaborate.

John reconstructed the spell, unpowered and untargeted. "I thought it might help you sleep better, since you've been having some nightmares. I think I must have gotten something wrong."

Lily's gaze went vacant for a moment as she picked apart the spell, and then she rolled her eyes. "Silly dragon. You can't just muck around with hormones. You have to take into account the current state of the body. This spell was crafted for an injured dragon, not a healthy one. You essentially just sent me into a rut."

John smiled sheepishly. "Sorry love, it won't happen again. But, I know one way to get rid of this," he squeezed lightly around her, "if you want me to finish what I started." John let gravity carry him just a little farther down, so that the thick base of Lily's cock started to wedge into him.

"Obviously we're finishing." She growled at him, "Though to be honest, I'd prefer to feel you. The real you."

"Works for me." He could admit to being a little curious about finishing as they were, but he was more than happy to be on the other end as well. She reached up, and plucked the disc from the back of his head. John barely had time for his vision to clear before Lily was moving. Now holding the disc in his own hand, he tossed it out of the way.

"Ohhhhh." Lily sighed pleasantly, and dropped down onto him the rest of the way as she regained control of her body. "That's what I wanted."

John couldn't help but growl in agreement as the wonderfully familiar feel on her squeezing down on his maleness replaced the sensation of being impaled by it. Lily wriggled happily atop him, grinding the base of her tail into his lap and twisting, so that he was worked back and forth inside of her.

"Although," Lily purred, suddenly grinning hungrily, "I can think of one more thing that could make this better. You hold still." Suddenly she was pushing herself upright, swiveling in place around his hips, still holding him inside of her so that her insides twisted around him until she faced down his tail and he was staring at her back.

"Tail, give it." She ordered.

John wasn't about to hesitate, and curled his tail up for her to grab hold on the tip. Lily wasted no time, and with both hands wrapped around his tail, brought it between her legs and began feeding it into her recently stretched vent. John's tail was certainly not as sensitive as his cock, but the feeling of her warm, moist passage wrapping around the tip of it was nice in its own way. What was even nicer was how the extra bulk helped her squeeze down even tighter around his shaft in her rump. She hummed, using her hands to begin thrusting the tip of his tail in and out of herself. John cooperated, and kept it as straight as possible, at least for a moment.

Feeling his tail moving up and down against his length through her flesh was quite enticing, and after a few thrusts he began to let the tip of it curl around inside of her, teasing his own erection through her walls. Lily grunted and responded by lifting with her legs, her tail rigid against his chest for balance as she began rocking up and down in his lap, still pumping his tail with her hands so that both there wasn't a moment of stillness for either of them.

John settled back, willing to let his wife take her time with him. As new and amusing as the predicament had been when she had been penetrating him, he was glad to be back in his body, feeling her rump ripple and milk him. Lily's backside was noticeably tighter than her sex, and her movements were tender at first. She had claimed that she had been erect for an hour, and it certainly felt like it to John. His arousal was hard as a rock, and felt almost too hot. Every twitch of her insides around him drew another surge of fluid from him, quickly pooling in her passage and making every thrust of her hips a little smoother and faster than the last. Between her attempts to ram more and more of his tail between her legs, and the sloppy pistoning of his shaft in her rear, it sounded like someone was beating a side of meat with both hands. The only thing louder were John's growling purr and Lily's increasingly desperate moans.

John was still plenty riled up from the somnambulant rutting, but as fast as he was approaching his peak, Lily got there first. The double penetration pushed his wife over the edge with gusto, and she slammed down into his lap with finality, still forcing his tail between her lips with pummeling force, masturbating herself through her climax. Her rump was wringing and

squeezing frantically, and he could feel every stroke of his tail into her sex, but it wasn't enough. He was right there on the edge, but he was going to have to take matters into his own hands to finish. He pushed himself up, rolling forward into a crouch and forcing lily down in front of him. She didn't even bother letting go of his tail at that point. Instead his wife collapsed onto her chest, her haunches still raised and held firmly to his groin. John gripped her hips, now squatting over her, and began thrusting fiercely, plowing into her backside with wild strokes.

"Jooooooohn." She wailed out his name like a prayer. He growled and slammed forwards one last time, his glands pulsing, and then exploding out, locking him into her rump as his body clenched and delivered the first rocketing gush of his seed into her gut. The euphoric haze of his long orgasm drowned out any sense of time; John's mind was focused entirely on the rhythmic throbbing of each new surge into his wife, and the way she responded by squeezing tighter around him. Finally his sensed returned to him, and he sucked in deep breaths as he he rested his weight atop Lily's back, still bound to her by his tie.

"Well, your spell might not have worked quite like you hoped, but I do feel pretty sleepy now." She laughed. "Roll over with me love, my legs are pretty shaky after that."

John nodded, and worked with her so that they could both collapse down onto their sides, her back to his chest now. He started to withdraw his tail, but she grabbed it with a foot, her claws keeping him pinned inside her, "Could you leave it? At least until your flare goes down?"

"Of course." He murmured into her neck. John still held her by the hips, but spread one wing over them both, sheltering them from the empty room.

"I might nod off, love." She mumbled. Her eyes were already closed.

John kissed the back of her neck. "We still have a few hours till morning, but there'll be a mess if I come out while we're both asleep."

Lily shrugged in his arms, "I'll worry about that later."

It didn't take long for her to drift back off, this time in her own body. John intended on waiting till he could withdraw, so that he could grab some towels, but after nearly half an hour, he showed no signs of that. Perhaps another side effect of his spell. Sighing with resignation, John closed his eyes and let himself drift off into the post-coital haze as well.

Zieadasra was true to her word, and returned early the next morning, catching Lily and her husband as the tried to deal with the aftermath of last night.

Lily looked up from the bed, where she was trying to collect the soiled cushions, as the sky-blue dragoness walked through the open doors. "Eldest Lililethan? I brought breakfa-oh!" It was impossible for any creature with a nose to miss the lingering smell of sex in the room. Zieadasra quickly backed out of the doors. "My apologies, I will wait in the dining room!"

"Oh, bugger." John muttered. "That's going to be a fun stone around my neck for the rest of the day." Lily smiled at his mortification. She wasn't particularly concerned. It was hardly the most compromising position she'd been caught in.

The two of them abandoned their efforts to salvage the bed, resorting to magic to remove the mess, and quickly retreated to the bath to clean themselves.

Zieadasra was waiting for them, her face painstakingly blank as they arrived for breakfast. She had brought up a large cart full of breakfast foods: fruit dusted with chili powder, cheese with peppers embedded throughout it, and thin sliced meat, marinated in a spicy citrus slurry. Lily was tempted to see how much more amusement she could draw out from the steward and her husband, but the younger dragoness didn't need any more trouble from them.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to eat and run, I need to be at the council early."

John nodded, "Okay. I suppose I'll take the children to the creche again. Zieadasra, do you have any other recommendations for things to do today?"

Lililethan devoured her meal quickly, and left the two of them to plan their day. She wished she could have waited for the children to wake up, but leaving so early served several purposes. First, it meant the halls and ramps would be nearly empty, so there were fewer dragons to stop and greet, and fewer dragons to witness her trying to work out her awkward stance. Last night's activities might have been a little too enthusiastic. Also, being the first to arrive at the council highlighted her impatience to get on with the deliberations. Typically the older members of the council would arrive last. To her surprise, Kyrenic arrived just as she did.

"Good morning, Eldest Lililethan." Kyrenic offered her a polite nod. "I had hoped for a chance to speak with you privately."

Lily could only imagine that Zieadasra had returned home and given a full report of her day as steward. She expected that Kyrenic might have some questions for her.

"Of course, Kyrenic, what's on your mind?"

"Well, my scion returned last night with some fairly wild claims. Of course we've all heard rumors about your mate. He might quite a stir on his first arrival here. But she tells me that the most outlandish rumor of all is true. Your mate was once a human?"

Lily smiled. "He was, yes. Is it truly so outlandish? Shapeshifting is a known discipline."

"Lililethan, you know as well as I do that this is not simple shapeshifting. Shapeshifting is a sustained effect, and ends when the spell does. Moreover, it would not impart all the capabilities of a dragon, or the ability to sire children. There are no active spells on your mate, and you obviously have two young scions. If it true that he was once a human, then this is an unprecedented event."

"Indeed," She acknowledged. "Hence why I have called for the council to meet."

Kyrenic nodded, and then shook his head, musing. "A human though? As your mate? Zieadasra says you've even wed him in some human tradition."

"He's no more a man than you or I at this point Kyrenic. As you said, the effect is permanent, not ongoing. So far as I've been able to tell, there is no way to reverse it."

"Well I should hope not! Can you imagine, a spell floating around out there that could turn a dragon into a man like that?"

For the first time, Lily realized why the demons might be interested in John's transformation. She wanted to scream at herself for missing something so obvious. They didn't want to repeat the process, they wanted see if they could reverse it. If demons could find a way to transform dragons into humans, or worse, into mindless animals, they would neutralize their greatest enemies. But Lily had spent months studying John when he'd first returned to her, mostly to reassure herself that there was no chance he would randomly change back. There were no seams or threads of magic to pick at, and even careful experiments with more wild magic had turned up nothing. As far as Lily could tell, this change was made to last.

But the demons didn't know that. As long as they thought John had potential as a weapon, they would never stop. And the council didn't know that. If they got the same idea, they could think John was an existential threat. Lily suddenly very much regretted coming back to Syrsarun. She returned to her partition, her mind suddenly frantic for options. She couldn't just cancel the deliberations. If she just got up and left, they would know something was going on. The word was already out that John was a transformed human, that cat was long out of the bag. And she still needed options to stop protect her family from ongoing menace of demons. All she could do was continue with her plan, and carefully try and guide the conversation away from the idea that John was dangerous.

The rest of the elders began arriving, along with a much larger crowd of spectators than the previous day. Lily had to work to control her face. She took a deep breath, and focused, loosing herself in the task of observing the others. Kyrenic quietly greeted Alalirrel, and they spoke quietly for a moment before the crimson dragoness turned to look at Lily with some surprise. If Clan Hata's elder knew, then Clans Siedkess and Karcaith would know shortly as well. Sure enough, as soon as Ithelashri and Ietrithala took their seats, the three allied elders were deep in conversation. So be it.

Yedanathil was the last enter the amphitheater, and take her seat. Once everyone had settled in, Lililethan stood and addressed the others. "Good morning, sovereign Elders. Today we will begin the second day of the proceedings: deliberation on the reason I called this council. I believe several of you are already aware of the reasoning for it." Lily nodded to Kyrenic and the three elder dragonesses that were now watching her carefully.

"I am aware that there are a number of rumors surrounding my choice in mate. I am here to confirm one of them. Johnathan Wright was in fact a human man, that was transmogrified by magic into a dragon."

There was a sudden uproar among the spectators, and then Raszeics booming voice rose above them all, speaking out of turn. "A human? You have picked a human to replace my brother?" The huge black dragon was on his feet, his wings bristling.

"Sit down, and watch your tone, Elder Raszeics. You are not addressing some whelp in your clan." Lily easily matched his volume, reminding the youngest elder who he was speaking to.

Raszeics sneered, but sat back down silently. Even Yedanathil shook her head in disapproval at the male. His outburst hadn't won him any respect.

Lily picked her words carefully. "I didn't intend to make this an issue, but after Johnathan was injured in the demonic attack on his home, and brought here to Syrsarun, I wanted to do the proper thing and inform the rest of the clans of this important event. I will open the deliberations now, and take questions if you have them."

Yedanathil stood immediately, "Elder Lililethan, do you mean to tell us that your children are sired by a human? I know of no shapeshifting spells that would allow actual reproduction."

"It is not shapeshifting. It is not temporarily. It is an accidental result of a spell that I had intended to be used entirely differently, but the metamorphosis was total and permanent. Johnathan is not wearing the shape of a dragon, he is one now."

Yedanathil paused a moment, her tail lashing. "And you decided to take him as a mate? Out of all the potential suitors here? Why?"

Lily was highly tempted to respond that the sovereign elder should kindly mind her own damned business, but she didn't get the chance.

Alalirrel stood silently, requesting a turn to speak. Yedanathil nodded and sat, giving her permission. "I do not know if you have seen this Johnathan Wright," she managed to pronounce his name correctly, "but I passed him this morning as he brought his children to the creche. He is not a poor candidate in the least. Perhaps not as impressive as elder Raszeics, but he has already made a name for himself fighting demons. I do not know if the rumors about him killing a leviathan are true, but his scars are certainly not overstated. I would accept him as a sire, if not necessarily a mate."

Alalirrel sat, and Lily had to fight to keep a grin off her face. She almost wished John could be here so that she could watch him squirm at the implied proposition. Still, it was probably safer for him not to have much interaction with the other elders. The sooner she could get them all home, the better.

Raszeics stood, her expression still sour, "What of this supposed leviathan? I understand you weren't actually at the battle," his voice dripped with scorn, "but you arrived after. Did this mate of yours kill one?"

"As you said, I wasn't at the battle. But from what I could determine, and from what I was told by others there, he did." The noise of the crowd was even louder this time. There were few dragons alive that had even faced a

leviathan, and even fewer that could claim they killed one alone. Lily, and now her husband, were among those select few. Raszeics remained standing, but silently, glaring at the spectators. After a moment Kyrenic stood, and when Raszeics failed to notice him, spoke up anyhow. "Elder, Lililethan, perhaps this would all be faster and less hectic if you would invite your mate to appear before the council."

"Yes," Raszeics drawled, "let's see this demon hunting monster."

Lily had suspected it was inevitable. She had held some slim hope that she could avoid having him actually attend the council, but it had been very slim indeed. "Very well, if there are no objections, I shall call a short recess and go retrieve him."

John grunted and stretched in the turbulent pool of hot water. Falling asleep in position with Lily had been a bad idea, and his tail and back were stiff. Zieadasra had politely recommended they go visit one of the hot springs, so he could work out some of his aches. They had a couple hours yet before the children would have to leave the creche. It was somewhat liberating in a way, to have some free time. Even if he didn't know exactly what to do with it. He certainly wasn't going to soak in the spring for two whole hours. He vaguely remembered his mother complaining about having too much free time once her children had grown up. John couldn't help but wonder if he was becoming a house-husband.

Zieadasra was lounging on the edge of the pool, reading some sort of long scrolling document, waiting for him to finish.

He splashed over to her, the uneven floor of the pool dropping enough in spots that he nearly submerged himself. "What are you reading?"

"A report on clan affairs. You probably wouldn't find it particularly interesting." The dragoness hadn't been quite as distant as she had yesterday. John wondered what Lily had told her.

He lifted his chest and forelegs out of the pool, leaning against the ledge,

"You know, you are welcome to swim as well, the water is quite pleasant. I know stewards are not supposed to enjoy themselves, but I feel weird with you just...waiting on me all the time."

She shifted away from him slightly and glanced up at the pool. "No, I'm afraid not, Johnathan Wright. This is a private pool. It would be in poor taste for me to join you." He grunted and slipped back into the water. He was used to having people watching over him at this point. Maribel frequently acted as a body guard and babysitter, but at least Maribel was fun. She would joke and poke fun and play with the kids. And at least Maribel didn't insist on using his full name all the time.

"Can you at least call me John? I feel like I'm back in the schoolhouse."

Zieadasra sighed, and set down her scroll. "Are you attracted to me Johnathan Wright?"

John froze, his thoughts scrambled. Lily had warned him that some of the dragons here would be forward with their intentions. Was that why their steward had been so uptight? "Uh, don't get me wrong, you're certainly attractive, but I'm afraid Lily is the only one for me."

"Do you want people to think you are attracted to me?"

"No?" He was confused.

"Then you need to start changing your behavior. Shortened names, like John, or Lily, are what mates call each other, in private. Your insistence on intruding on my space, and the familiarity with which you talk to me, is going to give every dragon that sees us the wrong impression. This must all be very new to you, and I can forgive your ignorance, but if you don't start doing better to blend in, you are going to cause all of us grief."

"Oh." He was relieved that she wasn't asking him for anything embarrassing, but still confused. He didn't think he'd done anything overly affectionate. "Then how should I act around you?"

"I don't know. Like a polite stranger? Just someone you don't know very well?"

"I don't know you at all. This is me being a polite stranger."

"Oh. Well then, like someone you don't like very much, but still have to be polite to."

John winced. It felt like every aspect of a social life was codified in strict guidelines here. He was starting to share Lily's desire to leave sooner rather than later. "I can see why Lily thought this place might be too strict for our kids. I was wondering if she might change her mind with these next to, but I'm guessing not."

Zieadasra's head snapped around to face him. "Eldest Lililethan is with children again? From you?"

"Yes. I mean, who else?"

"Oh, no...you shouldn't mention this at all. That is extremely taboo."

Bugger all, is everything a taboo in this damned place? "Right. That makes no sense. You're saying that two parents have can more than one child? What in the hell is wrong with you all?" John wasn't one to lose his temper, but this was just too much.

Zieadasra shushed him, glancing towards the door. "You are stuck in a human perspective, Johnathan Wright. We are not human. Think about this. Our females can not breed nearly endlessly like humans. We have very limited opportunities, and our bloodlines are carefully managed so that the healthiest, most compatible dragons end up with each other. Miscarriages, or the loss of a child for any reason, is a devastating blow, because that dragoness might only have a few chances to try again. More than that, our males greatly outnumber our females, and many of them will never get the chance to sire children at all. A male that tries to claim a female for multiple offspring is very likely denying another male that same chance. It is seen as the height of selfishness."

John felt his blood cool as her explanation sunk in. He didn't like it, but he could understand it. He nodded, swallowing his anger and sinking into the water up to his nostrils. He was still mulling over the issue when none other than his wife came hustling into the small grotto of the spring. "John, love, hop out of there and dry off. You've been called before the council. Zieadasra, would you please head down to the creche and take the children back to my residence. I've sent a runner ahead to let the guardians there know you're coming. There will be a human woman there, or she will arrive soon. Maribel is a trusted friend, and can watch over Ban and Laurelie."

John sensed her urgency and rushed to comply. If Lily had sent a message to request Maribel make the trip here, something had happened. Zieadasra bowed, and departed.

"What's going on love?" He whispered, instinctively lowering his voice.

"Listen John, something has changed, and we need to try and wrap up this council and get home as quickly as possible. I think I know what the demons were after."

She glanced back at the doorway and then leaned in so her words were just barely audible in his ear. "They want to try and learn if there is a reverse spell. To cripple dragons into the bodies of men."

"Oh." He nodded. It made sense. From what he could tell, demons hated dragons as much as dragons hated demons. "But then why do we have to flee from here."

"Because if the council thinks that that is a possibility, then you're potentially a threat to our entire race."

John's blood ran cold.

"Come on, I'll try and fill you in on details on the way."

Lily took John on a long way through the mountain, sticking to the

emptiest corridors and passages she could find, trying to help him cram in as much as he could about the formalities of the council and the different elders. "Remember, try and avoid talking about the demons as much as possible. Don't mention that you were the target. But don't lie. There's spellwork on the rostrum that will give you a nasty jolt if you try to lie to the council, and you've got enough scars already."

They finally arrived in the amphitheater, and much to John's dismay it was entirely packed. Not just with the other elders, dragons that were much more similar to his and Lily's size, but with spectators. Apparently word had gone out of the nature of the council, and curious dragons now packed into the gallery. It was hard for John to count the crowd, the confusing jungle of wings, necks, and tails in all colors of the rainbow didn't lend itself easily to counting. A hundred? Two hundred maybe? Zieadasra was waiting for them near the entrance into the central arena.

"What are you doing here? Where are Ban and Laurelie?" Lily asked.

"Maribel had already arrived by the time I got them back to the residence, along with several other dragons. She insisted that she 'had things covered' and I should head on my way. You said to trust her, so I returned to wait for you here."

Lily nodded with a sigh of relief. "Good. Thank you Zieadasra, you've done well. Your clan is here if you would like to join them?"

"At the moment I am still your steward, Eldest. I will remain by your side for now."

"Okay, here we go." John watched his wife approach a flat dais in the center of the arena that acted as a rostrum.

"Sovereign elders, welcome back from our short recess. As requested I have brought my husband, Johnathan Wright, to stand before you. I will remind you once more that he is not familiar with custom and courtesy here, and means no disrespect. Please forgive him any gaffs or mistakes. Are there any questions of me before he steps up to speak?"

None of the elders rose any concerns, so Lily nodded, and turned to John. "Johnathan, please approach the rostrum."

He stood, and cautiously stepped up onto the dais. Lily stepped down, leaving him alone and in the middle of a rather large crowd of dragons all focused intently on him. After a moment the first elder stood. John struggled just a moment to remember his name; Kyrenic. His speckled robin-egg scales made his relation to Zieadasra obvious, even before he spoke.

"Good morning clan-mate Johnathan Wright."

John did his best to emulate the delicate bow that Lily had showed him on the way. It was an unusual movement, with both forelegs bent at the elbow so that his chest nearly touched the dais, his wings half unfurled and his neck extended parallel to the floor. "Good morning Elder Kyrenic of Clan Arsothsk." He held the bow for a moment until the elder nodded for him to stand. It felt awkward bowing to the elder, on the surface of things. John was larger and heavier than this male, by at least a little bit, and certainly didn't feel he owed the dragon any fealty, considering they may want to kill him. But size didn't count for everything, and he was playing by their rules right now.

"I apologize for starting these deliberations with a personal question, but I am curious how satisfied you are with the service my granddaughter Zieadasra has provided you so far as steward?"

The question caught him off-guard, prepared as he was for something much more critical. He had to think for a moment. He was fairly sure he hadn't made a good impression so far on Zieadasra, and he didn't want to make that worse by saying the wrong thing here. "Zieadasra has been very helpful." He said carefully. "She has been endlessly patient with my social ineptness, and has helped educate me on the local culture and history." There. Nothing too flowery or overwrought. Just a simple truth. He resisted the urge to look back over his shoulder at their steward.

Kyrenic sat back down. John couldn't tell at all whether the elder was

satisfied with the response, but all the other elders were quietly conferring with their aides as if John had just said something supremely important. He somehow felt more nervous than ever.

The next elder sat up, a large white dragoness that somehow actually seemed fat. Or at least remarkably round compared to the others. But when she spoke her voice was sharp and hard. "Good morning clan-mate Johnathan Wright."

John fumbled for just a heart beat to remember her name, ducking in the bow to cover his hesitation "Good morning Elder Yedanathil of Clan Ilikess."

"I'd like to start the deliberations by establishing some facts. Can you please confirm your birth place?"

"Yes, Elder Yedanathil, I was born on my parent's farm, in the Pastock Valley, outside the capitol city."

"Can you confirm your age?"

John had to think a moment to remember that his birthday had passed during his coma. "I have just turned thirty-three years old, Elder."

There was a loud murmur that ran through the crowd. It was indistinct enough that John couldn't make out much, but he definitely heard the word child uttered more than a few times.

Yedanathil looked around imperiously for a moment, and the spectator's chatter ceased immediately.

"Can you confirm that you were once a human man, residing in a human city, born to human parents."

"I was, Elder."

"And can you tell us how you first met Elder Lililethan?"

John did not like this line of questioning. Old instincts prickled to the surface, learned from court intrigue back home. It felt distinctively like she was trying to make a point against him, or against Lily. But his wife had told him to answer honestly, so he did. "I attempted to summon an imp. Lililethan intercepted my summon."

"I see. And what happened next?"

John tried to use the same tactic he'd used with Hershel. "She held me there for several days, and educated me on the dangers of summoning demons."

"I see. And at what point did she cast the spell that turned you into a dragon?"

"I am not entirely sure, Elder Yedanathil. She gave me an item that she had enchanted, but the spell didn't work like Lily intended." He realized his mistake almost immediately. His use of his wife's sobriquet had caused another reaction in the crowd, and Yedanathil narrowed her eyes at him.

"You do not even show your own mate the respect of using her full name in public?"

John wanted to slap himself for the mistake. Zieadasra had just warned him about this, and he'd forgotten it completely. He couldn't even look back at his wife to gauge her reaction, he was fairly certain that would just be another faux pas.

Fuck it, in for a penny, in for a pound.

"Elder Yedanathil, I respect my *wife*," he emphasized the word just slightly, "more than anyone else on this world. She has made me a better person. She has given me two beautiful children." He remembered not to mention that she was carrying two more. "She has literally saved my life. And I have sworn a sacred vow to her; that she is blood of my blood, and breath of my breath. That we two will be as one. That I will honor her and cherish her above all others. Now, and forever. I have already spent a third of

my life by her side, and I intend to spend the rest of it right there as well. I do not call her Lily out of disrespect, but out of love."

Yedanathil didn't glare at him or sneer or anything else. She took a moment to absorb his words, and then sat down, turning to confer with her advisors. One again, John was completely at a loss as to what the dragoness's opinion of his speech was. At least the spectators seemed to have gotten some sort of thrill from the exchange. The whispering from the crowd was low, but constant. He had a moment to try and calm himself before the next elder stood. Alalirrel of Clan Hata addressed him, and he once again bowed and greeted her.

"Could you please explain the circumstances of the spell that transformed you?

Alalirrel suddenly sat down before he could answer, looking over his shoulder. Just followed her gaze and saw Lily standing. "I apologize for interrupting Elder Alalirrel, but unless we want to risk the potential of other curious individuals trying to replicate these results," she looked meaningfully at the large crowd, "it may be safest to keep that information confidential." Lily sat, and a thin, gold scaled dragoness stood immediately.

"I respect your caution Elder Lililethan, but I think we should hear the answer to this. After all, can you imagine the potential if we could replicate this? We could bolster our population practically overnight!" The elder, Ietrithala, or maybe it was Ithelashri, sat back down before John had to greet her.

Alalirrel stood again, resuming her questioning, "Please answer the question Johnathan Wright."

"I will do my best to remember it, Elder Alalirrel. It was a long time ago, for me." The emotions at the time were burned into his memory, but ten years had dulled some of the details. "Lily had agreed to offer me a boon at the end of my stay with her. It was a very rudimentary spell, wild magic I learned later. It was set without defined limits or parameters. I activated the spell with a spoken command, and it interpreted that command by transforming me into

a dragon."

"Do you remember the command you used?"

John desperately wanted to look to Lily for advice, but he knew that was a bad idea. "I do, roughly." He swallowed, "I believe the words were 'I want Lily to find someone that makes her happy'."

The dragoness nodded. "Can you explain why that was your wish?"

John really wished he could brush off the question as easily as he had brushed off Hershel those months past. "I had originally desired to stay with Lily and learn more from her, but she insisted I return home to my family. When I did, I was arrested for using a summoning circle. The punishment was death by burning. Even if I had wished for an escape, I would have been an outcast in my homeland, and disowned from my family for my crimes. I suppose, that at the time, I simply wanted someone to be happy with the outcome."

"And so when you made that wish, the spell decided that you were the best possible candidate to make Eldest Lililethan happy." Alalirrel finished.

It wasn't an idea that John had actually considered before. He hadn't been specific when he worded the spell. He hadn't wished that *he* could make Lily happy. But it had selected him anyhow. "I suppose so. I will not pretend to know the details of how it all worked. I do know that as soon as I triggered the spell, it transformed me into a dragon."

Alalirrel sat down, as inscrutable as the rest. Long moments passed, and John wondered if this questioning might finally be over when the other male elder stood. Raszeics, the elder of Clan Kamvra. This dragon was immediately familiar, his black scales and green banding almost identical to Irsasz. If the relation was under any doubt, the massive size sealed it. When Raszeics stood and addressed him, he didn't bother hiding his distaste for John. When he asked his questions, it was not with the same calm poise of the others. Instead Razeisz paced, back and forth in front of his narrow partition as if he was trying to escape.

"Could you please share your view on the attack on Pastock? We have heard far-fetched and troubling rumors of what occurred there."

John once again had to trust his wife's advice to be honest, despite his instincts. "Well, it first started when we heard that the humans there had discovered a hellmouth. Lily and some of her mages went to investigate while I prepared to evacuate my children and family to safety. Lily returned, and was stranded in The Blazing Shore when our portal was sabotaged."

"So she intended to flee home?"

"No, not at all. Due to the circumstances of the time, I was unable to fit through the portal. Lily intended to escort our children for just a moment, and then return to fight. I was supposed to be the one that evacuated. But the demons had managed to possess one of her mages, and destroyed the portal to isolate me."

"And what happened after?"

"Well, we moved to the city, to assist with the defense. Me and two score of human mages. I worked with the humans on a battle-plan, and then the rift opened."

"So you voluntarily stayed behind to help close a rift? Alone?"

"At the time, Elder, I wasn't actually aware of how serious it was. My experience with demons ended at my attempt to summon an imp. And I was not alone. I believe the combined forces of the city of Pastock was nearly twenty-thousand men assisting me. My part in the first stage of the battle was honestly mostly supportive, simply trying to thin the demons before they reached the walls." John just barely managed to keep his annoyance out of his voice. Whatever issues this dragon had with him, it was no reason to downplay the efforts made by the city's own defenders. A quarter of the men on the walls had died outright in the battle, and a half of those that had survived had suffered permanent injuries. Five thousand dead soldiers, and another seven or eight thousand maimed. Not to mention the civilian

casualties from those that couldn't evacuate into the inner districts.

"What of the rumors of the leviathan?"

"I managed to successfully lure it away from the city and into a trap." John said simply. He did not expect the sudden clamor and chorus of voices from the gallery. Raszeics attempted to quell the crown in the same manner as Yedanathil, to somewhat less success. He got the feeling that there was a hierarchy, even in this council of otherwise sovereign elders.

Eventually Raszeics gave up, and returned his attention to John. "You lured it away? To kill it on your own. Why would a leviathan leave behind an entire city of victims, to follow you alone?"

John knew he was entering dangerous ground, and tried to hide his nervousness as he deflected. "I wouldn't say I killed it on my own. The city cannons wounded it before I engaged it, and I didn't kill it through skill or strength. I led the leviathan to a mine-shaft filled with volatile gas, and detonated it"

"That still doesn't explain why it followed you at all. Why would a leviathan chase a single dragon? Why was it there at all? Summoning a leviathan costs the demons immense resources."

John clenched his jaw; perhaps he could pass off his silence as ignorance. These were questions he couldn't answer without lying, and he couldn't lie.

"Well?" Raszeics growled at him, expectantly.

"I believe they were targeting me." John finally admitted.

"Targeting you? Why?"

"They knew of my transformation. I believe they wanted to capture me and study it."

Raszeics stared at him, and the noise in the gallery died away. For the first

time John felt pretty certain about the reaction of the elder that had addressed him. Raszeics looked absolutely delighted as he sat down. No other elders stood, and after a long moment Lily finally rejoined him on the dais. "If there are no other questions for my husband," she flashed him a weak glance and smile, "Johnathan, please step down."

Lily watched with pride as her husband returned to take a seat in her partition. He had done *so* well. The stubborn, impetuous nature of John's human side had cut through the decorum of the council, and left one of her rivals fairly speechless. Unfortunately, he couldn't avoid giving up at least most of what they were trying to keep hidden. The elders might not have reached the same conclusion that Lily had about the demon's intentions, but they knew that John was a target now. Kyrenic stood again in the silence. His solemn face practically confirmed her worst fears as he spoke

"If I may, Elder Lililethan, I believe I have an idea of what the demons might want with your mate. Our conversation earlier made me think of it. We are speaking of replicating this process, but if the demons find a way to reverse it, to turn natural born dragons into men..." He had to trail off as the spectators erupted once more into noise. They had to wait several long moments before the crowd's sense of decorum recovered, and they quieted down. Many of the observers cast fearful glances towards John now. Her husband had quite suddenly become an icon of a great and terrible fear, the thought that they might be stripped of their very selves.

"Elder Kyrenic, I have been with John for ten years now, and have spent that time constantly assuring myself that he will not change back. I have conducted every test imaginable, and I cannot find any way to reverse this."

The sky-blue dragon nodded, but continued. "I understand Eldest Lililethan," he said gently, "but this is a potential danger to all of us. And you know as well as anyone that ten years is not that long after all. We have to decide what action, if any, we are going to take." He sat.

Raszeics stood, looking triumphant. "Considering the possible scope of this threat, the safest option is to eliminate him. Obliterate the remains and leave

nothing left to study."

There were gasps and murmurs in the crowd, and Lily fixed the male with a furious stare. "I apologize in advance for this outburst, but the next one of you that mentions killing my husband as a serious option, I am going to rip your tongue out." Her voice was jagged, and her claws dug into the rostrum, tearing long gashes in the magically reinforced stone.

Raszeics went wide eyed as the enchantments on the generations old dais faltered, and then failed in a cascade. The black dragon quickly backpedaled and sat back down in his partition.

Yedanathil stood, her voice measured, "Killing him is obviously *not* an option." She said evenly. "But we cannot ignore this, and we can't risk him falling to another demon attack. He can be best kept safe here, while we study him to ensure that there is no risk to us."

"And how long do you expect that to take?" Lililethan asked as politely as she could manage.

"I don't know Eldest, but we cannot afford not to be thorough. It may be indefinitely."

Dragons of Syrsarun, Part 1

Clan Sanjeia (Elder/Queen Lililethan: emerald green) - Associated dragons: Johnathan, Renenly, Noluleth, Kisayal, Nithessi
Clan Arsothsk (Elder Kyrenic: sky blue flecked with black) - Associated dragons: Zieadasra
Clan Hata (Elder Alalirrel: red with white belly)
Clan Kamvra (Elder Raszeics: black with green bands)
Clan Siedkess (Elder Ithelashri: forest green)
Clan Karcaith (Elder Ietrithala: solid gold)
Clan Ilikess (Elder Yedanathil: solid white) - Associated dragons: Maaglieth

Gentle slaps of splashing water stirred Johnathan from his slumber In the fuzzy reality of half-sleep it could almost be mistaken for the lapping of waves against the shore. When he opened his eyes, though, it wasn't to the sight of an ocean. He awoke in the elder's suite of Lily's clan residence. Flickering firelight filled the room from the massive hearth on the far wall. Soon the source of the splashing became apparent as his wife stepped up out of the pond-sized bath. Her slender green frame blocked out the light of the fire as she crept over towards hearth and leaned practically into the flame, letting the heat boil away the water that dripped from her scales. Despite the fire's best efforts the room had taken on a bit of a chill. A storm had lashed the island for days, driving freezing rain and wind into the halls and homes of Syrsarun. The mountain city was carefully designed to allow for maximum ventilation but it had the unfortunate side effect of channeling the wind of the storm throughout the mountain.

He lifted his head reluctantly from the soft cushions of the bed, admiring the vision of his wife as she turned about. Steam wisped away from her and caught the orange light, outlining her just a moment in a blazing halo. "Is it time for the council today?” He mumbled, his voice slurred with sleep still.

Lily started, and then grimaced in chagrin. "Sorry, love. I didn't mean to wake you.” She padded across the room to give him a peck on the top of his snout, even as one hand gently pushed him back down towards the bed. "Go

back to sleep, you aren't scheduled today.”

"I should get up and see to the children.”

"They're fine. There are plenty of dragons around to keep an eye on them for a bit. You need to get some rest.” She was insistent, and it was only after he'd settled back down that she stepped away. "I'll be back around noon.”

Despite his initial resistance, sleep was already claiming again him as the door closed behind her with a muted thump. Muffled voices on the other side of the door kept him from slipping all the way to slumber, and he found himself once more in that hypnagogic state. He lingered for a time on that threshold of slumber but Lily's departure had stirred the rest of the household. Sanjeian dragons answering the call of their elder had filled the clan residence, and now the sounds of activity filtered into the bedroom. He grunted in defeat and pushed himself to his feet. Aches and pains ignited throughout his body as he moved, and John ignored them as best he could. A month of invasive magical testing by the council had greatly set back his long-term recovery, inflaming injuries that still hadn't quite fully healed. He felt it in the stiffness of his joints and the flares of pain from deep scars. He paused a moment in front of the fire. The heat soaked into him and soothed his body, loosening some of that stiffness. Faint traces of Lily's scent lingered here, citrusy and fresh. For just a moment he stood and enjoyed the privacy, before sighing and heading out. Opening the sliding wooden door, the scarred dragon was greeted by two guards that looked up at him in surprise. Each was smaller than him, but they bore the scares and posture of veterans, armored in layers of metal plates and chain.

"Clan-mate, we were told you needed to get some sleep.” John was unable to wear the translator in case its magic interfered with the council's tests. Fortunately Clan Sanjeia was in the habit of tutoring its members in human languages. John stared at the armored dragon for a moment, fumbling for a name to match the face. He hadn't been able to spend much time getting to know any of the dragons of Lily's clan; the council had kept him busy from sunrise to sunset most days, other than the few days he'd spent in the care of increasingly frustrated healers.

"Sorry...Renenly?” John responded cautiously, certain he'd gotten the name wrong anyhow. The golden scaled male nodded just slightly, however. "Can't seem to get back to sleep, so I might as well get up and get the kids breakfast.”

"Kisayal is already feeding the group of them.” The second guard spoke up. Noluleth? John was fairly certain that was the right name. Kisa at least was familiar. She was a governess for the clan and had temporarily taken over much of the care for Ban and Laurelie. "Perhaps you might find it more peaceful outside? There is a break in the weather this morning and the sun is quite nice. You really look like you need some sleep.” The guard's tone made it clear that he would prefer for John to follow Lily's instructions. John was torn, he hadn't spent nearly enough time with the children these last weeks, but he didn't have the energy to argue. He was exhausted.

The elder's wing did have an impressive cliff-side balcony, the biggest in the residence, conveniently placed to watch the sunrise. With a defeated shrug John turned down the hall that led outside. "All right.” The guards fell in behind him.

Lily had previously been hands-off with her clan. Decades ago, when she had taken on the responsibility of a human kingdom, she had arranged for other leaders in her clan to operate autonomously, with only some guiding principles to constrain them. They could call on her to represent them at the council if they needed, but otherwise she left them to her own devices. Her free-spirited candor and disregard for tradition made her an awkward leader to have around all the time, especially since Sanjeia dragons were expected to be the epitome of manners and etiquette. However, with her fame and power, she made a potent figurehead that could step in when necessary. The arrangement had worked out and none of the dragons here seemed to resent her for her absence. Indeed, the dragons here seemed quite happy with this liberty. Without leadership decisions all bottle-necked into one elder the daily affairs of the clan were handled with a brisk speed that was uncommon in Syrsarun.

But the two dragons behind him wore very functional armor, reminding him that protection was the primary reason Lily had involved her clan.

Underhanded deeds like assassination were not common in Syrsarun, but that didn't mean they had never happened. Things were tense among the clans; and some days in the council it had seemed like the arguments might even turn violent. Lily didn't want to take any risks by leaving John or the children unguarded at home. Zieadasra had stayed on as their steward but the young dragoness wasn't half John's size. Besides, she had trained as a diplomat, not as a fighter. So along with legal scholars, mages, and personal attendants to help with the council, there had been guards. Lots of guards.

Ren and Nol stayed at a respectful distance as John came out into the brilliant morning sunlight. The brooding storm had broken. Heavy clouds still lingered on the horizon but for now there was blessed warm sunlight. The pavers of the terrace were carved carefully to make sure the worst of the rain ran over the edge, but puddles still remained. John found one of the dryer spots and huffed out a light sheet of flame. The water boiled away with an angry hiss, leaving steaming stone behind. John coughed and winced. His throat still stung when he used his fire. Testing the rock with one careful forepaw, he found the temperature just about perfect, and eagerly sprawled out onto the hot surface he had created. He watched the guards dry their own spots at either end of the terrace before sitting down to keep a careful watch over him. Finally he closed his eyes. Soaking in the heat from below, and the warm sunlight above, some of the aches slowly faded, and sleep came quickly.

It was a deep sleep that left the dragon confused when he woke up. John felt rejuvenated, or at least better than he had, even though it had seemed like he had simply blinked. Some hours must have passed though, for the sun had risen high into the sky. He shivered as he stretched out and lifted his head to find Renenly grinning at him with restrained laughter. A moment later John discovered the source of this amusement. Faint giggling and clumsy paws padding on his tail drew his attention. He turned to find his children crouched there. They were festooned with the decorations of a local game; glittering tufts of feathers and ribbons tied about them in numerous places. Around their wrists and ankles, down their tails, and on their wingtips. Two teams, wearing two different colors of ribbons would play a sort of tag, with the goal being to snatch as many of the other teams ribbons as possible, without losing your own. The source of their giggling was an attempt to tie the same ribbons

onto John. The little bundles were sized for children though, and on him they looked more like bits of windswept debris.

"I think I might be too big to play.” He chuckled at Ban and Laurelie.

The two of them looked at their father with smiles that didn't bear the slightest bit of guilt. Instead they giggled louder and went about tying on another bundle. "Can we play out here?” Ban asked, his mouth open in a grin.

"We tried the other one,” Laurelie said, looking across to another balcony just visible around the cliff, "but there are too many dragons there.”

"Hmm, but then I'd have to move, and I just got these stones nice and hot.”

"Dad, they aren't even warm.” Ban said skeptically.

John blinked as he realized that he had been asleep long enough for the pavers to get quite cool under him. Still, he wasn't quite done teasing his son yet. "I suppose you could just play around me. It could be a new challenge!”

"Dad!” His son pleaded in exasperation. The two of them looked expectantly up at him, before Laurelie suddenly hopped away.

"We can dry you a new spot!” She chirped as she dashed away.

John watched in amusement as Ban followed her in a race to the edge of the plaza, near the guard, where the two of them began spitting little trickles of flame at the puddles. Little puffs of steam marked small successes, but it would be a task worthy of a saga for them to clear a spot large enough for John. He stood, and ambled over, "Thanks you two, I'll take it from here.” He nudged them gently with his tail, before once more breathing out a muted curtain of flame. Ban watched in jealous awe as water popped, sizzled, and boiled off like light fog in the hot sun. Soon the pavers were shimmering with lingering heat, and John eagerly coiled his frame atop them.

"Go ahead and get the others then.” He prodded them.

"Thanks dad!" Ban called as they scampered back inside to fetch the rest of their teams.

It didn't take long for the crowd of children to return. Lily's clan had shown up with families in tow, eager to greet the new scions of the royal bloodline, and they had brought a score of children with them. None of the children had hit their major growth periods yet, so their sizes were all roughly similar, though it was clear than Ban and Laurelie were among the older and larger in the group. The first time they had played John had worried they might be too rough, but this game of tag was centered on finesse, not strength.

Between the council's tests and his convalescence they had spent enough time here for both Ban and Laurelie to get a conversational grasp on the language. John couldn't help a rising sense of pride as he watched his offspring help lay out the colored flags for the game boundaries, chatting along the entire way with the other kids. Even if he himself could only understand the occasional snippet or sentence. Soon the field was set, and with a collective cheer, both teams erupted into motion, charging each other in erratic lines, each young dragon trying to catch another off-guard for a chance to snag a ribbon while trying to defend their team-mates alongside them. Soon the first few dragons were trotting back to the rear to deposit their prizes, Ban and Laurelie among them, before darting back into the fray.

"Did you decide to play as well this morning Johnathan?" An amused feminine voice interrupted his attention. He had been watching the game closely enough that he hadn't noticed the new arrivals emerging out onto the terrace. Kisayal, the clan's governess led the way. The friendly faced dragon was older than most here, and she had a matronly manner that went well with her duties. Her relationship to the royal bloodline was clear from both her great size and her pristine green scales; she didn't quite have the glittering emerald hide as Lily but if John hadn't known better he could have mistaken them for sisters.

"The kids decided to induct me into their team this morning, but I'm fairly certain for moral support only." John replied with a smile. Behind Kisa, Zieadasra and Maaglieth worked together to tow along a heavily laden cart of food with their tails as the trio made their way around the playing field to join

John. Soon the two guards moved over as well to share lunch.

Ziea hadn't seemed entirely pleased to be their steward during their first few days here, and John had assumed she'd return to her own clan once the Sanjeia dragons had arrived. Instead, the small cerulean dragoness had argued to stay. Arsothsk had always been the largest clan, consisting of most of the crafters and mundane professionals among the dragons. The dragons of their clan were, on average, too small to gain a reputation as powerful fighters, but during the great war Arsothsk had been closely allied with Sanjeia. They had provided the equipment and materiel to keep Lily and her veterans in the fight. It seemed Elder Kyrenic was keen on rekindling that alliance. Lily had agreed with this, and allowed Ziea to stay on.

Maaglieth was the most unexpected of the group. John had never thought to see the brawny brown dragon again after his stint as an impromptu guard back home. Soft-spoken on the rare occasion that he spoke, and constantly wearing the slightest hint of an amused smile, Maaglieth had made only a slight impression based on how good he had been with the children. In fact, Maaglieth had been so quiet and unremarkable in his presence that John had more or less forgotten about him afterwards. So it had been quite unusual for him to show up on their threshold several days after the fateful council meeting that had landed them in this mess. He had bluntly informed Lily and John that his elder, Yedanathil, had requested that he attempt to use his prior position of trust to gain access to their household. To spy on them. Despite the antagonistic relationship between Lily and Yedanathil, Maaglieth didn't seem embarrassed or concerned to admit his task. If anything, he had seemed somewhat impatient to be on his way. It had caught him and John both off guard then when Lily had agreed. Lily had later explained to John that there was little harm in allowing him to stay. It wasn't as if they were planning anything important, and having Maaglieth in place here might keep Yedanathil from trying to get other more eager spies in place.

Over the last few weeks both of the outsiders had proven themselves useful enough to make John grateful that they had decided to stick around for the mess that he was brewed up in. As they reached Johnathan, Ziea and Maaglieth quickly began busying themselves with the food, dishing up heavy plates and handing them over to the guards first. Kisa stood and looked out at

the playing kids.

"I'm sorry they woke you. Your young ones are devilishly good at slipping away when they want to; I didn't realize they were gone until they came scampering back to collect the others. I can corral them all up if you would like some more rest."

John dismissed the idea with a flick of his tail. "It's fine. I'm just happy they're finding friends here." He didn't give voice to his worry that growing up among humans would make his children outcasts among their own kind. Kisa studied him a moment and nodded.

"Children are children, all the world round. If you're absolutely sure you're okay with them, I have some lessons to prepare for the older children."

John gave the governess a small nod of assent.

"They've already had lunch," Kisa called as she turned away, "don't let them wheedle you into getting them snacks." She halted a moment to address the children in their own language, her voice stern enough to make them pause briefly in the game. When the children replied in a chorus of affirmatives the governess nodded in satisfaction and disappeared inside. Delightful scents of strong spices and steaming meat drew his attention as Ziea offered him a dish. Stacks of smoked pork and fruits in some sort of sweet glaze had his mouth watering instantly.

"Thank you Ziea." John had given up entirely on trying to pronounce everyone's full name. He had lost the will to care if it was seen as boorish. It seemed like everyone had adapted though, and Zieadasra simply nodded as he accepted the dish.

"Elder Lililethan is with the council?" Maaglieth asked offhandedly between bites. With his mouth full and his eyes focused on Laurelie triumphantly dashing away with another ribbon, John could only mumble an affirmative.

"That's a shame. I overheard some very interesting conversations last night.

But I suppose we can exchange gossip when she returns.”

Maaglieth played the wallflower remarkably well, mostly staying out of sight and out of mind. But every now and then, when he had the occasion to have a private moment with Lily or John, he would casually drop some bit of information regarding the plans and activities of his own clan, or of Elder Yedanathil. It seemed bizarre to John. Everything he had seen so far had led him to believe that loyalty to a clan was a cornerstone of society here, but nobody else seemed at all surprised.

"She should be back soon.”

Zieadasra turned to examine him. One of the interpreter trinkets dangled between her horns. "How are you feeling this morning Johnathan?”

"Better actually. I suppose Lily was right; I really did need to get some more sleep.”

She nodded, and followed his gaze out at the game. "Your children are playing well. It is rare to see someone take to the Colors-Chase so naturally.” The proper name for the game didn't translate well, and John had heard it also come across as Glitter-Chase.

"They get it from their mother I expect.” John replied proudly.

When they had cleaned their plates Maaglieth rose to gather them up and place them back on the cart. Stretching and fanning his mottled brown wings the smaller dragon lifted his head towards the sun. "It is nice being outside again. I was beginning to worry we might not see the sun again.” He looked warily out at the horizon, "Although I fear it won't last. It's unfortunate that the children will be cooped up inside.”

John nodded. The clouds had crept much closer during his nap, and now loomed nearby. "Well, thankfully we still have the Creche to give them a chance to stretch their wings.”

"I wouldn't recommend the Creche right now. Most of the guardians there

have been rotated out for dragons of the Kamvra clan.” Maag spoke casually again, even as he mentioned Raszeics' clan.

John swiveled his head to look at the would be double-agent with surprise. Maaglieth's offhand guidance of the conversation and his easy tone hid the importance of his information. Yedanathil was perhaps the most vocal of Lily's opponents, but at least she seemed to hide her animosity behind a veneer of decorum and politeness. Raszeics did not. The enormous elder was frightening in his intense hate, sometimes appearing nearly feral as he growled and snarled at Lily during the council meetings. Of all the elders, Raszeics was the only one that John could admit to being frightened of. If he had managed to usurp control of the Creche guardians, John would never feel safe leaving their children there alone. He chewed over his worries as he watched the group of kids finish the first round of color-chase. Bundles of feathers were counted, and one of the younger dragons began to mark out the scores with a piece of chalk while the rest of the children worked together to tie their ribbons back on.

"Maag, may I ask why you are being so helpful to us? Yedanathil seems to hate us; it can't be safe for you to go behind her back like this.”

Zieadasra and the Sanjeia guards shifted uncomfortably as John blurted out something that was apparently meant to be left unsaid. Maaglieth just smirked thoughtfully for a moment. "The situation is complex I'm afraid. But I will explain as best as I can if you do me the favor of answering some questions yourself.”

A familiar uneasiness came over John. Recent events had taught him to be wary of anyone prying too closely into his life. "What questions?”

"You must know that Elder Lililethan and yourself are the center of any number of rumors. I simply seek clarification.”

This was the most verbose Maag had been since he'd arrived, which only made John more nervous. Only after a moment of consideration did he agree, "Okay.”

Ziea looked on with interest, and even the guards kept one ear cocked in their direction, trying in vain to look like they weren't eavesdropping.

"I have spent enough time among humans to know that women play a much different role in your society than they do in ours, and that human ideas of beauty are very much different as well. Given this contrast, what was it that drew you to Elder Lililethan?"

It wasn't the type of question John had expected from the deadpan dragon. If anything it seemed more like gossip. He had to pause a moment to consider. He had been with women before he had met Lily, and while he had enjoyed certain aspects of it, there had always been something hanging over his dalliances.

"I suppose it *was* the differences more than anything. You are right: human women in my homeland very rarely held positions of power, and even then only through marriage to a powerful man. Marriage is often a woman's only bargaining chip, and that means there is always a certain degree of politics behind relationships. A woman is expected to take care of the home, and the children, but money, and business, and pretty much everything else is a man's responsibility. By the standards of my country, I was never a very good man. I preferred being at home, and helping with the fields and orchards. I was never that great at seeking power or wealth, and I was miserable at dealing with the court. After my first time-" John caught himself as he almost spoke too freely, "-talking with Lily, and seeing the kingdom she ran, I realized that it didn't have to be that way."

Maaglieth's smirk had spread to the guards, and even Ziea had a twitching at the corners of her snout. His slip-up had not gone unnoticed. John simply sighed and continued. "It was refreshing to not have that pressure. To feel protected. And there was no game behind her desire. She wanted us both to enjoy ourselves, and expected nothing else in return."

Maaglieth nodded. "And that impression was enough to make you use the spell she gifted you to turn yourself into a dragon?"

"Oh. No, that wasn't entirely intentional." John cleared his throat in

chagrin. "You have to understand, I was still quite young at the time, and more emotional. Lily knew she had a duty to have children, and though I understood, her rejection still hurt. I had experienced something entirely new, and then lost it. Then, when I was returned home and subsequently arrested for using a summoning circle... well I suppose I panicked. It seemed like my life was crashing down. I wasn't well trained in magic either, so I didn't use the spell very rationally. I just wished that someone could make Lily happy and give her a family. The wild magic she had given me took its own path after that, and I can only be thankful that it did. I am very pleased with the results so far."

"You are happy then? You wouldn't change anything, even with the attack on your city? Even with the losses in your homeland, your own injuries, and the trouble you find yourself in now?"

John's teeth snapped closed in an immediate flash of guilt. He would never know how much of the attack on Pastock was caused by his presence. Just like he would never know how many men he might have killed with the fire he had set loose upon those demons. Months spent in recovery had given him time to grapple with those questions, but they still stung. He turned to look at Laurelie and Ban, weaving through the scramble of other young dragons, smiling and laughing as they played.

"From what I gather, the people responsible had already started down the path they were on before I ever met Lily. If she and her mages hadn't been there, it might have even been worse. Instead of an attack, it might have been a take-over. I know enough about your own war to know that it started when demons infiltrated the leadership of a human kingdom. If we hadn't interfered with those plans, that could have been Pastock next. A whole new war." He looked down at his scarred hands again. "Maybe it sounds greedy, not being more curious, but this spell and my choices have given me the best years of my life with Lily, and a family that I love dearly. I would do it all the same again if I had the choice."

He felt sure of his words, but it didn't stop him from feeling the echoes of pain from the last year. He fell into a quiet reverie, and only stirred at a gentle touch on his shoulder. Zieadasra held a bowl-like goblet towards him, a

comforting smile on her face. A very rare gesture coming from the smaller dragoness.

"Thank you Ziea.” John forced a smile to his own face, and gratefully accepted the drink. The pause to drink the chilled wine gave him a moment to compose himself.

Maaglieth interrupted the quiet once again, "You've been here for long enough now. What's your opinion of this place so far? Of our culture and society?”

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not much of a scholar, and my opinions would just be a limited perspective.”

"Please. It is rare for any of us to be able to hear the honest views of an outsider here.”

This wasn't exactly the morning of relaxation that he had been hoping for. "Well,” he rumbled reluctantly, "from the position of an outsider, I still have trouble making sense of a lot of things. There are the small things, like the fact that I still have no idea what you all exchange for payment. Gold seems useless when even less skilled mages like me could use magic to pull it from the earth. But there are other, larger differences that I don't understand.” He trailed off. Hopefully the vague statement would satisfy Maaglieth. But it was Zieadasra that prompted him further.

"You mean all of the rules and customs of the clans? I have heard you complain several times about how strict things are here.”

"Well, no, not exactly. There are many human cultures that are just as strict, and just as heavily regimented. You clan structure isn't so different from some of the feudal societies of humans. A rich, powerful dictator at the top, with stratified tiers of upper, middle, and lower castes. But among humans those cultures usually maintain order through fear and force. The dictator uses his wealth and power to build armies, and uses those armies to subdue the population. It works among humans, because humans have a much harder time fleeing such a culture. Successfully settling somewhere

new requires hundreds of men and women working together, gathering supplies, building shelter, farming, and so on. And that's after managing to escape, and likely sneaking across foreign borders. Attempts to colonize new lands requires immense resources, and frequently end in failure and death anyhow. But dragons can fly, or even use magic to teleport, practically anywhere in the world. Dragons have absolute freedom of movement and the ability to survive anywhere they care to live. Instead everyone seems entirely willing to submit to a culture that is, quite frankly, oppressive."

His words fell on a silent audience. Ren and Nol appeared thoughtful, if not exactly happy, though Zieadasra looked ready to object.

Maaglieth looked pleased though. "You make interesting points. It's true that gold and gems hold little value to us. The things dragons value are more inherent. Take the paintings that most clans decorate with. The painter's talent is the display of wealth. It is why, despite being regarded as subpar warriors, Arsothsk is among the most influential clans. But there is also inherent value in certain bloodlines. Dragons breed slowly, and children are valuable. Traits like size and strength, or even the Sanjeia bloodline's unusual tendency to bear twins, are carefully hoarded. Obtaining these traits through breeding is both the main goal of negotiations and the primary means of control in the clans. The elders control breeding rights and curate bloodlines, and so their clans obey to ensure they have their chance to have children."

John was tempted to just leave the conversation there. But Maaglieth's argument still didn't satisfy him. "It still doesn't make sense. The elders control breeding rights, as long as you submit to the elder. But what's to stop a group of dragons from gathering together and agreement to meet somewhere. It's as simple as me saying to you 'Let's meet at the base of that mountain over there every fall.' Harvest festivals are practically universal in human cultures, and though I obviously simplified it, that's the origin of most of them. Literally just a bunch of farmers agreeing to meet and celebrate a successful crop together." He shrugged and frowned. "I know there's probably more to it, something I've missed since I didn't grow up here, but you asked for my view as an outsider."

"I did. Thank you for indulging me. And if I may make an admission, I

think there is merit to your opinions.”

Ziea finally burst the bounds of her self-control. "Some small merit perhaps, but you have missed too much of what it is to be a dragon. The duties we hold closest, and the threats we hold at bay. Discipline makes us strong, and keeps us at peace with each other. We don't act out of some mindless obedience, but out of a shared necessity!”

Despite her vehemence, Zieadasra's words struck Johnathan as exactly mindless obedience. It sounded like something memorized into rote through repetition. Still, he didn't want to insult her, and John hunched his wings in apology, bowing his neck slightly towards the young dragoness. She huffed out and fumed, but calmed herself. "You speak of things from a human perspective. I understand that. But we are not humans.”

Renenly broke in, surprising the group of them. "She is right, Clan-Mate. I have traveled many nations of the world, and to turn this around, there are a great many things humans do that break any reason. Human's penchant for war, and the tendency to slaughter each other for little reason. Or the shameful way they treat their children, letting them suffer and starve for the failures of their parents.”

"I don't think we should be too eager to make accusations about the treatment of children.” Maaglieth's response had a hard edge to it, and Renenly actually snapped his mouth shut, looking away, shamefaced. Maag waited a moment before continuing.

"Do you know what a 'wild-born' dragon is?” He asked, glancing back to John. "I have heard humans use a similar term; natural-born.”

Natural-born. The term settled with distaste in John's thoughts. His father had always said, 'If you're going to call a man a bastard, call him a bastard, don't dress it up behind nice terms. Otherwise don't bring it up.'

John glanced away, "I don't know that they're exactly the same. Natural-born is a child born out of marriage. They are not treated well among most humans, and there are much crueler terms more commonly used.”

Maaglieth waited until John made eye-contact before continuing "They are more alike than you think. Wild-born dragons, even if they later are accepted into a clan, are rarely accepted as equals, and as you said, there are much crueler labels frequently applied.”

"And you're wild-born?”

"I am. My mother was a trade envoy for Clan Ilikess. A prized position. She met a male that she fancied on one of her missions, and decided not to wait for the clan's permission to have a child. She was shunned for this decision, unofficially exiled. It was burden that she thought she could bear, but she was mistaken. I wasn't much older than your children when she began to petition that I be recognized, and she reinstated. She argued that my size could be valuable to her bloodline, as they had very few dragons to match. Eventually she succeeded, and left my father to come home. The stories she told me growing up made me think that we would be coming back to a wonderland. Instead we were pariahs. I was always treated as other-than, less-than.”

"And that's why you work against your clan?”

Maaglieth snarled and half-rose to his feet, his wings mantling out aggressively. "I am not working against my clan!” He spat. The normally placid male was smaller than John, but heavily built, and certainly still large enough to be a threat. The two guards shifted smoothly, rising and turning to flank the brown dragon. The display was enough that even some of the children on the edge of the game turned to look.

Maaglieth shook himself, exhaled slowly, and settled back down. "When I realized that I was viewed as an outsider here, I decided that I would overcome that prejudice by being better. I would prove that I was more than a wild-born rambler. I submerged myself in studies of our people, our history, and our culture. And what I found disturbed me.”

He sighed unhappily. "I have spent decades uncovering lost records of our people. There has been no one to guide me. We have the greatest of mages,

generals with centuries of experience, craftsman that know the secrets of every metal and stone, but we have no historians. No philosophers. Despite our long lives, dragons are a people detached from our own past, and in a way, detached from ourselves.”

The smaller male looked as tired as John felt. Almost defeated. He stayed silent for a long pause, but before John could prod him to continue a sudden agonized howling from the playing children interrupted their conversation. John turned to look, and to his horror spotted his own children harrying another dragon. A young female, larger than either of them but still gangly and awkward from recent growth, howled and tossed. Ban clung to her back with his claws, resisting her attempts to buck him off, even as Laurelie gripped one wing in her teeth to pull her off balance.

"Ban! Laurelie!” John was on his feet in a rush, his voice harsh and ringing across the terrace with enough force to make the nearest children leap away.

"Johnathan, you should not interfere!” Zieadasra hissed. John knew the dragon's theory on letting children handle their own conflicts, and he could agree with it. Up to a point.

Her protest was forgotten as quickly as their conversation as John waded into the play field. The crowd of young dragons parted before him, leaving Ban and Laurelie exposed to frantically disentangle themselves and huddle sheepishly under his gaze. Their victim limped away towards the adults. Her golden scales were scratched and nicked, leaving a couple small flecks of blood in several places..

"What do you think you're doing?” John kept the angry growl out of his voice, but his words were hard. He had taught them better.

"She was cheating!” Ban mewled plaintively.

"She was Dad!” Laurelie piped in, more angry and less apologetic. Her tiny face was scrunched up in indignant anger. "I watched her!”

"And do you think attacking her is a good way to deal with cheating?”

"Yes!” Laurelie responded furiously.

John took in a deep breath and tried to quash his anger and disappointment. His children had only ever played with humans before, and had always seemed to have an instinctive grasp of how fragile their playmates were. This was something new. He couldn't call upon his own childhood either. His father had never been the violent sort, but Albert's idea of discipline had been a quick cuff to the head and an admonishment not to be stupid. Ban and Laurelie might be children, but they were dragons, with claws and teeth already capable of killing. John sighed and glanced around.

The rest of the children had scattered away, but not very far. They stood watching as John towered them. The young golden dragoness had made her way over to Renenly. The glittering gold guard stood stiffly, watching her approach, but the truth sunk in for John when Renenly protectively curled his tail in front of her. The golden scales gleaming under his armor matched hers perfectly. After a moment Renenly leaned down to murmur in her ear, his eyes never leaving John's. Great.

John let out a breath and settled himself down closer to Ban and Laurelie's level. "Come here you two.” He resisted the urge to look back at the guard as he pulled his children in, close enough to hopefully not be overheard. Dragons or no, these were his kids, and he was going to try and teach them right. Ban and Laurelie curled up just under his snout, looking up at him with a mix of trepidation and curiosity.

"What is her name?”

"Sabda.” Ban admitted.

"How was she cheating?”

"She was stealing ribbons.” Laurelie growled. "Stealing them from other people's piles.”

"Was she playing well before she cheated?”

"No," Ban chirped. "She only got one ribbon!" He seemed entirely too pleased with this information.

"Has anyone else only got one ribbon?"

"Nope!" Ban replied cheerfully.

John nodded sagely, keeping his face stern as he looked down at his son and daughter. It was enough to wipe the smile from Ban's face. "Now I want you two to listen and be honest. If everyone else, all of your friends, were playing a game that you were bad at, do you think you might be unhappy?"

Laurelie replied insistently, "We wouldn't cheat! We'd play something else!"

"All alone? If everyone else wanted to play Color-Chase?" His daughter stayed mulishly silent this time before shrugging her wings. "And if you were so bad that you only had one ribbon? If you were going to be the worst at the game, do you think you just might try and steal a ribbon or two, to not look so bad?"

"No!" Ban spoke loudly, but from the way he was shifting on his paws John wasn't convinced.

He decided to gamble. "Really? Even if other people were making fun of you for only having one ribbon?"

"*We* didn't make fun of her!"

"Did anyone else?" They both glanced away shamefully.

"Cheating is bad, I agree. And sometimes people cheat because they're greedy and want more. But sometimes people cheat because they want to fit in." He spoke softer now, lowering his head to brush the end of his snout against theirs as they looked back up at him. "Do you think that if you invited her to switch teams and helped her to play better, she would still cheat?"

"But she's so bad!” Laurelie protested. John took a quick glance to confirm that their team had a considerably larger stack of ribbons.

"She's so bad that it makes it easy to win?” When his daughter hunched down in deeper shame he continued. "I know you two know better than this. You don't make fun of Anita, Clara, Rose, and Eric, because they can't fly like you. And when they went into the ocean the first time, you were there helping them swim. And because of that, you have four new friends.”

John could only hope that reminding them of their human friends back home would drive his point home. "You two know how to help others be better. You've done it before. So what would you do to help Sabda be better this time?”

It took a long moment. So long that John feared this conversation had been for naught, but eventually Ban spoke up. "She stays still too much.”

"She can't make up her mind.” Laurelie reluctantly added.

"So why don't you tell her. You two are so good at this game, you know how to help her play better. And if she gets better, she'll always want to be on your team for helping her.” Eventually they both nodded in agreement. Laurelie even had a familiar look of determination in her eyes, something very akin to her mother. "I'm going to send you two over there now. What is the first thing you're going to do?”

"Apologize.” They answered in practiced unison.

"Okay, off you go.”

As his children scampered away, John stood and moved close enough to overhear without looking like he was interfering. Renenly still stood stiffly over his daughter as Ban and Laurelie approached. After a moment he withdrew his tail, leaving Sabda exposed to her tormentors. Some of their own intuition must have come into play because neither Ban nor Laurelie approached closer. Of course it didn't matter if John could overhear, because they spoke to Sabda in the local language. Still he listened in vain and could

make out the familiar conciliatory, if slightly reluctant, tones of his children as they said sorry. As they continued to speak, Renenly started in surprise, and glanced between John and his children. A moment later Sabda left her father's protective presence and followed Ban and Laurelie towards the other children, where they began chattering amongst themselves. Shortly, the whole group was stripping off the feathered ribbons and cleaning up their area.

John wasn't sure exactly what had been decided, but he wasn't about to interrupt an apparently successful apology to ask. Instead he moved back towards Maaglieth and Zieadasra, passing Renenly on the way. The guard shifted slightly, just enough to partially intercept John. "You didn't understand what they said?”

"No, I'm afraid not.” John replied defensively.

Renenly searched John's face intensely before dipping his head just slightly, though his expression was confused if anything. "They offered to change the teams, but they decided to go play a seeking game instead.” He quickly straightened himself and stepped out of the way.

Maaglieth wasn't so much smirking as he was openly grinning when John returned to them. Zieadasra looked distracted, curled in on herself watching the departing children. The moment John settled down, Maaglieth passed him a fresh chalice of wine. John hadn't even noticed he'd spilled the other. He sipped, watching as the crowd of young dragons chased each other inside.

"It is good timing,” Maaglieth said wryly. "It looks like those storms will be here soon. Perhaps it's best if we head inside as well.”

"Hold on Maag, you still haven't explained yourself.”

Maaglieth shrugged his wings, staring off into the sky. "I would prefer not to repeat myself. If I am not mistaken that is your wife off there. I believe it would be easier to simply show both of you.”

A quick glance up confirmed Maaglieth's suspicions. Slate gray clouds

filling the horizon made it easy to spot the glint of bright green reflected in the sunlight. Watching Lily sweep her way smoothly around the curve of the mountain at the head of her flock of attendants, John couldn't help but be distracted enough to forget Maag's end of the bargain. He barely noticed as Zieadasra stood and mumbled to the guards. "We will give you a moment Johnathan."

He nodded absently as they departed, leaving him alone to wait.

Anger and fatigue clashed in Lily's thoughts as she flew. After weeks of throwing all varieties of spells at her husband in an attempt to find any cracks in the magic that had transformed him, the council was running out of ideas. So far nothing had shown to have even the slightest effect, other than to make John miserable and send him repeatedly back to the healers. Subjecting her husband to this torture had disgusted her, and every day she found herself tempted to call it to an end. John hung on though, and for the first time Lily agreed with him that this was a necessary pain. Her own examinations had left her confident that there was no risk of John turning back, but with the revelation of why the demons might be chasing John, there was a risk they couldn't ignore. If the other elders were right, and there was something that she had missed, it would place all dragons at great danger. She couldn't neglect such a threat to her clan. Even if she had been selfish enough to spirit her husband and children away despite that threat, it would open up a rift in the clans, and likely provoke the other elders into drastic actions. Her duty was clear, and she could only be grateful that John was so willing to share it.

At least she could find some relief that the council's tests had so far been fruitless. The wild magic that had transformed John had left no trace or foothold for other spells to latch onto.

Will-working was the literal translation for magic from the dragon's language. It was a more accurate term: a mage literally forced reality to follow their will. To an experienced practitioner like Lily, nearly any outcome imaginable was possible with the proper investment of time and effort. Real and permanent shapeshifting like John's, however, was still out of reach. Even with an improbable amount of time and effort. Limited forms of

shapeshifting weren't particularly hard; Lily had used it to disguise herself as human for her first meeting with John. But that required an active spell to maintain. Even that had been a shallow mask, a surface of humanity to cover her true form still lurking beneath. No one had managed to truly turn one living thing into another. Any attempts had always killed the subject. It was the complexity of life that was the issue more than anything else. Living creatures were complex arrangements of countless small structures, all interconnected and working together to make a whole being. Skilled mages could maintain a spell to bypass some of those complications, but only temporarily. As if that weren't enough, sapient creatures had a surprisingly strong resistance towards attempts to alter their bodies.

And so John remained a dragon, a fact that seemed unlikely to change. She had argued as much to the council this morning. Aside from the days that John had to spend recovering with the healers, they had met nearly every day for over a month now, letting the best and brightest mages among dragons test his limits. Even several of the other elders on the council were ready for a break. They all had other duties that were being delayed by this experimentation, and it made sense to give their collected mages a chance to research and plan rather than stumble into another blind test. After all, if they came up with an idea at a later date Lily and her family were easy enough to contact. It had seemed as though she might have swayed the others, until Yedanathil had began needling her.

"The safety of our kind demands that we be thorough in this matter. We cannot allow inconvenience to make us complacent and end our investigation early, lest we miss something. After all, if your husband was ever captured by the enemy they would not limit themselves as we have."

Lily had disputed that this wasn't an end, but simply a pause before they continued on more strategically. It didn't make sense to continue to burn so much effort uselessly. Yedanathil switched to arguing about compromise, that maybe they could send some agents of the council home with them to continue the examinations. Then, wearing a smirk that Lily had desperately wanted to snatch off the fat worm's face, Yedanathil had suggested that perhaps it would be acceptable to leave Ban and Laurelie here in Syrsarun for observation. That perhaps some element of the wild magic might linger on

them. The proposal was a dirty trick, serving both to insinuate that Lily's children might not be legitimate dragons, as well as a veiled attempt to separate Lily from them, leaving them in a position where they could be influenced by the council. It was bold, but the worst part is that it wasn't even particularly outlandish.

Traditionally, young dragons would be boarded with the clan at around eight years old to begin the lessons that would prepare them for their roles later in life. Ban and Laurelie were only seven now but it wasn't unusual for dragons of important bloodlines to be separated younger than others. Lily herself was the same age when she had been handed over to the clan by her mother. The memories of that parting had never quite faded and part of the reason Lily remained away from Syrsarun was to spare her own children that same trauma. The rest of the council had been taken aback by her vehement refusal, and in the end they had ended the session with nothing changed and nothing decided. A waste of a morning that she would have much rather spent with her family. Her only consolation of the entire ordeal was that the council had granted one more day of recess before meeting again, to allow the elders to discuss further experiments.

Only when she finally began to descend around the terrain towards their residence did the irritation begin to fade, banished by the sight of the figure waiting for her out on the terrace. There wasn't any mistaking the dragon below. The sunlight dappled over his form like a shattered ruby, the thick bands and blotches of pale scar tissue worked with the streaks of black scales along his wings to break up his outline. John stared skywards at her, and she could just make out his eager smile. Lily hurried herself along, outpacing the half dozen court attendants that had accompanied her to the council, and a moment later was flaring her wings out to stall herself into a gentle landing. John approached her before she even had all four limbs on the ground, catching her up in his arms and wings as he tucked his head in against her throat. These human-style hugs still amused her for how awkward they were, but she wouldn't trade them for anything. She returned his tight embrace, breathing in just a bit to enjoy the faint taste of him on the air. Seconds later the other dragons of her flight were touching down, studiously ignoring their elder's display of affection as they circled around to head inside. The faintest echoes of suppressed laughter drifted from the mouth of the corridor as Lily

was left alone at last with her husband.

"Did you get some rest this morning John?" Lily mumbled down into the back of his neck.

"I did. I'm feeling much better." He didn't question her about the council, or push the conversation any further. John simply held her as the tension of the day slowly drained from her body to be replaced by a placid joy. She hummed happily, content to share this private moment in silence. A harsh gust of cold wind washed over them, bearing the biting taste of ozone. The breeze sent a chill through John's frame. The thinner scales and stretched tissue of his scars had left him more sensitive to the cold, and Lily spread her wings to shield him, reluctant to give up this rare intimacy. But the storm wouldn't be ignored, and a distant rumble of thunder left no doubts that it would soon be upon them. "Let's head inside John, I don't want you out here in the rain."

As the first wisps of clouds started to drift across the sun, they disentangled themselves and walked together into the residence.

"Welcome back Elder." Zieadasra stood just inside the corridor, waiting for them, Maaglieth a step behind her. The brown dragon gave her a respectful bow, his snout split with a customary stoic smile.

"Thank you Ziea." John had never quite broken the habit of using shortened names, and rather than let him suffer alone Lily had made an effort to do the same.

Maaglieth fluttered his wings and cleared his throat to draw her attention before they could move any deeper inside. "Elder Lililethan, while we are still in private I have some news I'd like to share."

She looked at him curiously. Maaglieth was not usually so direct in his approach.

"Elder Yedanathil has been meeting with many of the other elders in private. I know that she has had private audiences with Elders Raszeics,

Alalirrel, Ietrithala, and Ithelashri. I do not have the full details of what they discussed, but from what I know that Clan Sanjeia, and especially your place as the elder has been a topic of interest."

Lily nodded. She knew that Raszeics and Yedanathil would be seeking to influence the other, though she had expected their interest to be more focused on John than on her.

"I know this isn't unexpected, but I got the feeling there was something more to these meetings. I know they have been gathering information of some sort. I have my suspicions as to the goal. I learned that Elder Raszeics has managed to replace the Creche guardians with his own agents." This intelligence did give her pause. The Creche was a pseudo-sacred establishment, meant to provide a safe place for the children of all clans. It was supposed to be free from interference. It only deepened her suspicion that Yedanathil and Raszeics meant to target her children. Before she could process any further, Maaglieth spoke again. "I know this is a sensitive subject, but do you think Banzhrakin or Laurelie might have spoken to the other children there that you are expecting again?"

Lily's heart skipped in sudden alarm, but that alarm soon turned into defensive anger. Maaglieth watched the expressions playing over her face, and his smile disappeared. He dipped into a deep bow, exposing the back of his neck to her as he laid his head nearly on the ground. "I do not mean any threat by these words Elder, but I was assigned to our maternal ward for several years. You are far enough along now for me to see the signs. I expect that others have noticed as well, even if they don't have the proof."

Even the protective fury for her children couldn't block the logic of these words. Lililethan knew that she couldn't keep her pregnancy hidden forever, and she was coming up on the first year now. Of course others would spot it. Her anger deflated into resignation, and she bent down to nudge her nose against the back of Maaglieth's neck. "Of course. I'm sorry." The apology felt lame, but Maaglieth smoothly straightened back up, his smile already back in place.

"In any case," the Ilikess dragon continued as though nothing had

interrupted him, "there may not be any merit to my fears, but Elder Yedanathil is deeply involved in our nursery. She spends a considerable amount of time with expecting mothers, so I would not be surprised if she has suspicions."

Lily considered her options. Decades ago she had struck down many of the laws regarding breeding in her own clan. Instead of personally handling the management of bloodlines she had left those decisions with the families themselves. But that wouldn't mean much to the other clans. Tradition was clear about this; even breeding with two males too closely related was uncommon, as it was every dragon's responsibility to ensure the healthiest, most heterogeneous bloodlines possible. Still, there were some options available if Yedanathil and Raszeics thought they could spring this on her. Nothing would take away the shock of committing such a cultural taboo, but there were some facts on her side. It was likely too late to move on any plans this afternoon, but she did have another day before the next council meeting. She shook herself. "Thank you, Maaglieth."

He flipped his tail dismissively, then turned to lead the way inside now that his intelligence had been delivered. Soon the bustle of the household distracted her from her worries. Lily had been hesitant to involve her clan in this affair. Her abdication had been working well for all involved, and she wasn't keen on picking back up the mantle of Elder. She had to admit though that there was something deeply satisfying in seeing the dragons of Clan Sanjeia going about their business, filling the residence with comfortable background noise and friendly faces. Being absent for so long, Lily had worried that the dragons of her clan might have grown to resent her. After all, a proper clan had an Elder to sit for them at the council, not an appointed spokesman. But as they passed by dragons going about their business in the halls of their home, there was no animus to be seen. Instead they were greeted with smiles and respectful bows. As they approached the center of the residence, and the spacious parlor there, a small crowd of children came dashing towards them.

"Hello Elder Lililethan!" They called as they darted between the adults, quickly scattering along various corridors. The faint echo of a voice calling out from the parlor followed in their wake, chanting a count. The group of

them followed the voice, and soon found its owner. Laurelie was sitting in the middle of the residence's common room, both wings held over her eyes. Several of the adults of the clan were lazing in the heated sand-beds here, looking on curiously at the young scion.

"Forty-nine, fifty! Ready or not-" Lily's daughter pulled her wings back, her face fixed with in a resolute glower, which quickly changed into glee as she immediately spotted her parents. "Mom!" The little dragoness squealed happily and came in a rush to latch herself around Lily's forelimb. "Hi Mom, hi Dad, hi Maag, hi Ziea, can't stay! Ready or not here I come! Bye!" Laurelie gave them all a farewell wave of her wings as trotted away, her eyes keen and her nose in the air.

"Looks like they've taught the others hide and seek." John chuckled.

Lily smiled happily at her husband. She had intentionally kept Ban and Laurelie away from Syrsarun, not wanting to inflict the rigid lifestyle of the clans upon her children, but she had worried that separation would alienate them from other dragons. It was a great relief that they were getting along well. The lounging dragons gave her small nods, and Lily spotted an empty bed among the sand with enough room for her and John both. Before she could move though, Maaglieth spoke up again.

"Elder, I was having a conversation with Clan-Mate Johnathan earlier, and there is something I would like to show both of you. It would require some hours though. I know it is much to ask, but I think it is important, and I don't know the next time you will both be free from your duties at the council."

Lily eyed the empty sand-bed longingly, "Maag, I really would like to spend some time with my family..." She spoke gently, and hoped the younger dragon would take the hint.

"Bring them, if you wish. This isn't anything dangerous, or secret. Just something forgotten. The more dragons that see it, the better, as far as I'm concerned."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw John inclining his head, giving her a

meaningful look. With a defeated sigh she turned away from the inviting bed. "Very well."

Zieadasra departed to round up Ban and Laurelie, a task that took longer than expected due to the fact that Ban was hidden in an empty pool all the way across the residence. Word spread among the children that something was happening, and by the time the steward returned the entire swarm of young dragons was tailing her. It wasn't just the kids that had grown curious. An outsider leading their elder on some mysterious journey was enough to get the interest of a great many of the Sanjeia dragons. More and more of them trickled into the lounge, including Kisayal and her daughter Nithessi. Kisa quickly brought the children to order, hushing them and gathering a head count, while her daughter eagerly moved forward. "Hello Elder Lililethan." The dragoness gave her a quick bow. Nithessi was the same age as Ziea, though larger, just old enough to begin taking on duties and assignments herself. Her green scales marked her clearly as a descendant of Lily's bloodline, although distantly related.

"Hello Nithessi." Lily responded with a smile. The girl had already stopped paying attention to her elder, he eyes fixed across the room at Johnathan. Lily watched in amusement as Nithessi turned towards her real target.

"Hello Johnathan, where are we going?" Nithessi was hardly the first dragon to show attraction to Lily's husband, although bolder than most. Lily hadn't been lying when she told him that he was handsome. Quite a catch by any standards. But Lily couldn't really feel threatened by the attention he drew as she watched John look up absently from their son and daughter.

"Oh, hi Thessi. I'm not sure."

Lily actually felt a pang of sympathy as Nithessi faltered, apparently ignored. The girl quickly shrugged it off though, and continued to make attempts to engage John in conversation. Soon they had gathered all that were going, and departed.

Their procession through the city was large enough to draw attention, and dragons from other clans watched in open interest as they made their way

deeper and deeper into the mountain. Lily spotted several dragons from Ilikess and Kamvra discreetly following them, keeping their distance as Lily's entourage passed out of the more populous upper sections of the city. Eventually even those spies were forced to peel away as they descended into levels that were empty and quiet. Parts of the city had been nearly abandoned as the losses to the war piled up, the space that had once been occupied by families now sadly deserted. Soon they were forging a path through a thin layer of dust on the floor, moving through hallways that had been unused long enough to for the cleaning crews to begin ignoring them. The lighting became more intermittent, and the normally carefully maintained murals were faded and cracked with age.

They came upon a corridor where the lighting was out entirely. The halls ahead of them stretched on into absolute blackness. The oppressive silence and darkness pressed down upon the group, and Lily could feel the nervous fear of the children. Despite the fact that she was surrounded by a dozen adult dragons, Lily could help but feel disconcerted herself. It felt like she was somewhere she was intruding in someone else's home. Maaglieth paused a moment to tug one of the glowing blue orbs from the wall of the hallway, breathing a wisp of power into the globe to flare it into a bright torch before using a simple spell to suspend it above his head. Several of the guards in their company did the same. The young dragons in the group huddled in the middle of the cluster of adults as they continued deeper. It wasn't much longer before they came to a dead end. The passage ahead of them was blocked off with an unpainted wall, with only a single vertical bar of heavy steel interrupting the stone. Maaglieth reared up to to grip the bar with both hands. His brown scales swelled and trembled in the blue light as he strained and heaved, tugging back against the bar. Nothing happened.

He stopped and huffed, looking back sheepishly, "Sometimes the air pressure is a bit much. Could I get some assistance?”

Johnathan, already at the head of the group, shuffled forward awkwardly to hunch over the smaller male until he could wrap his hands around the bar as well. Together, the two of them hauled back. Their claws dug into the stone floor as they pulled, and soon a faint crack began to appear in the seamless stone. A sibilant howl of air whistled through that crack. Lily felt her ears

pop as the air pressure changed. Amoment later the two dragon tumbled back as an enormous slab of solid rock swung open, leaving a gaping entry deeper into the mountain. Maaglieth landed atop John's chest, and the two dragons lay in a pile for a stunned moment before quickly separating themselves.

Maaglieth shook himself of with a shiver, taking an extra step away from John. "Ah. Sorry. We should wait a moment for it to vent out. Sometimes foul air collects down below."

"Maag, what is this? Why have you brought us here?"

Their guide looked off into the darkened tunnel he had just opened thoughtfully. "These are levels of Syrsarun that have been sealed off and forgotten. They have been a part of my research into our history."

Lily followed his gaze into the abyssal blackness ahead of them. Her mother had never told her of this. Nor had her grandmother.

"Dad, are there monsters down there?" Ban's whispered voice interrupted her thoughts, even as she heard other children seeking comfort from their own parents. This likely wasn't the adventure any of them, children or adults, were expecting.

"No dear one. Just quite a bit more dust I'd expect. You two can hop on my back if you want to see better."

Lily couldn't hide her smile at the clever wording. Offered the chance to seek the comfort of their father without the insinuation that they were afraid, both of them quickly clambered up between John's shoulders. Other children followed the example, and even young dragons who's parents had not accompanied them were finding willing adults to carry them. John and one of the larger guards both ended up carrying a small crowd.

"That should be long enough." Maaglieth said in satisfaction, and stepped through the doorway. The hallways beyond were eerily silent. The shuffling of footsteps and clacking of claws against the stone seemed too loud. When Maaglieth spoke again he had dropped his voice into a hush. "I found records

of sealed sections of the city in some old architectural documents. It took years of petitioning the council to get them to allow me to install a door.”

"But why were they sealed?” Lily asked, scanning the walls. The decoration here was drastically different than the brightly colored murals above. Heavily stylized carvings were dug into the walls, with only muted colors applied on top. Dragons were not presented in realistic, lifelike proportions, but instead reminded Lily much of human heraldry, all full of regal poses and simple shapes. There were no alcoves for the glowing orbs that illuminated the levels above; instead the ceiling was studded with ornate chandeliers, now dark and useless.

"We're getting to that. Zieadasra, I believe there was a census done several decades ago. Do you recall those numbers?”

"Of course.” The steward replied absently. She too was looking over the strange artwork. "Do you want the clan numbers, or overall?”

"Overall please.”

"Last count was eleven-thousand, two-hundred and fifty-six recognized dragons between all the clans. Estimated another thousand or so unaffiliated dragons living outside of the confederacy.”

Lily heard a stumbling footstep, and glanced back to see John recovering from his shock. "That few?” He asked, his face appalled

Zieadasra looked at him defensively, "We suffered significant losses in the great war. Our population is growing again, but we haven't recovered entirely.”

"Ah, yes. Of course. It just seems like a very small number. For an overall population that is.”

The steward shrugged, her hackles still up. "Humans are more numerous, I understand, but you can't compare a few thousand extra humans against a population of dragons.”

Lily winced inside. She had made an effort to ensure that her clan was educated on the outside world, and a great many Sanjeia dragons spent some time abroad, but they were an anomaly. Many dragons in the other clans never left the island, and were woefully ignorant of reality outside of the confederacy.

"A few thousand...” John looked confused, "Pastock alone had nearly a hundred thousand people living in the valley. Wake is twice that. I know there are even larger cities as well.”

Zieadasra faltered, "You must be mistaken. A hundred thousand humans all in the same place? How would they even feed that many?”

One of the guards shrugged. "Not just humans. One of the continents in the southern ocean hosts a country of beast-folk. I visited their capitol once, and I estimated that it might have held over a million people.”

Zieadasra looked between the Sanjeia dragons, aghast. Truth was slowly dawning on her, a truth any veteran of the great war knew. An experienced dragon might be worth a small army of another race, but the other races had a great number of armies. Facing demons and men in battle had destroyed nearly a third of their population in a conflict that lasted decades. Dragons still hadn't recovered. The ruins of the empire they had burned had already grown into another.

"Ah, here we are.” Maaglieth led them into a massive gallery. The walls stretched away in a curve, extending far enough that the blue light of their torches didn't reach the far side. Enormous statues of armored dragons rearing up on their hinds stood in a ring at the center, reaching all the way up to the shadowed ceiling to act as pillars. In the center of the ring stood an octagonal monolith of obsidian, and on each face of black glass was mounted an enormous golden plate. Looking closer, Lily could see dense blocks of text engraved on the gold.

"The language has changed a bit, but you should still be able to read it. I would recommend that you start here.” Maaglieth spoke to Lily, and inclined

his head towards one of the plates.

It was carved into draconic words, but the grammar was odd, and it took Lily a moment to puzzle it out before she began to read aloud. "This monument stands to commemorate the victorious fallen, the heroes of our great struggle against the enemy, which we have conquered in this year of-" She stopped, "Maaglieth, this date, that's more than two-thousand years ago."

He nodded, his smile appearing grim in the dim light of the room. Their interest suddenly sparked, the other dragons approached the pillar, looking over the plates themselves. Together they looked over the history of this forgotten war, ancient even by the standards of dragons. The more they read, the more upsetting the story became. Another great war against the demons, which had devoured thousands more lives, leaving enormous sections of Syrsarun empty. The records of individual battles were vague, but the numbers that were indicated were terrifying. Dozens of dragons perishing in a single skirmish, hundreds in the larger battlefields. How could this have been forgotten?

"According to what I've found, it was consuming far too much effort to maintain these abandoned sections." Maaglieth spoke loud enough for them all to hear. "I expect they didn't mean it to be a permanent situation, but before we could grow the population enough to need to open them back up, we found ourselves in another war. A cycle that has repeated itself long past living memory. There are other monuments to the fallen, other *victories*," his voice drawled the word out, "each costing a little bit more of us. And just as the oldest and most experienced dragons of Sanjeia were the first to fall in the last war, so it was in this one. As each elder falls in battle, it robs us of that much more of our history. Time and time again. Thus we end up with no one left alive that remembered these tunnels even existed."

"Maaglieth," Zieadasra spoke quietly, "you mentioned the census before. Have you found any previous census?" It sounded like she didn't want to hear the answer to the question.

"Several. The oldest record I could find indicated that Syrsarun once held nearly thirty-thousand dragons, with the islands as a whole supporting twice

that number. I suspect there are even older sections, but the lower levels here have flooded."

"Why haven't you shown this to the council?" The steward asked pleadingly. Lily already knew the answer.

"I have tried. I explained my findings with my own elder, pleaded with her to come see for herself. But Elder Yedanathil is more concerned with growing her clan in the present."

Maaglieth was wild-born, and had spent his early years among humans. It had been one of the reasons she had accepted him as a guard for John back in Wake. The status of wild-born dragons in the clans was not an enviable one. Maaglieth must have had trouble getting an audience with Yedanathil at all. It wasn't surprising that he hadn't been able to convince anyone to take him seriously. She would be skeptical herself, if she hadn't just witnessed it. It was strange to realize, but looking back, she couldn't ever recall being concerned with the history of their people. After all, her own grandmother used to tell her stories stretching back hundreds of years, and surely that was all the history she needed. Until it wasn't.

"Johnathan asked me why I was helping you. This is why. The way we are living, it isn't working. I don't know what we need to do, but something has to change. So far the two of you seem to be the only ones doing anything different."

Lily turned and shared a wary glance with her husband. It wasn't so long ago that they were listening to a similar speech, getting tangled in the politics of John's home.

Maaglieth glanced between them, "Please do not mistake me, I know the two of you have your own responsibilities right now. To be honest, I do not think an active effort on your part will do any good. You both have a...troublesome reputation right now." He bowed apologetically at his own words. "I am optimistic though that the example you have made might start to influence others. Change through osmosis if you will. Anyhow, now you've seen." He shrugged, leaving the thought open.

Yes, they had seen. And having seen, Lily had no idea what to do about it. Maaglieth was right; Lily was hardly in a position with the council the begin arguing for widespread changes.

"Dad, can we go back? This is boring.” Laurelie's whisper cut through the hanging silence. Ban led the other children on John's back in a chorus of agreement.

Lily smiled, and looked one last time at the monument, "Yes dear, now that we've seen we can go back.”

"Oh! Can we go to the crutch?” Ban mangled the word in his excitement.

"Ah, sorry I don't think-” John started to say no, but Lily felt an inspiration. A wonderfully mischievous inspiration.

She interjected by clearing her throat. If Maaglieth wanted changes... "Actually I think the Creche sounds like a lovely idea. I think we should all go.”

John looked at her curiously, but nodded and followed her lead.

The walk back out was filled with the excited hoots of the children, looking forwards to the impromptu field trip. The journey down into the depths of the mountain and back had taken some time, as Maaglieth had said. This late in the afternoon the Creche would be closed. They arrived to find the doors barred, with only a single guard standing watch. The young male bore the black sash of the Creche guardians, but Lily recognized the green bands and the size of him. He was one of Raszeics many children. Despite this, he bowed deeply and spoke respectfully. "My apologies Elder Lililethan, the Creche is closed for the day.”

"I am aware. I thought that since it wasn't getting used anyhow, I would take the opportunity to reserve it for a short time.” She smiled sweetly at him, almost feeling guilty for putting him on the spot.

"Ah! Elder, that is...” He paused, shrugging his wings helplessly. Children weren't allowed in the Creche unsupervised, but Lily's group had plenty of adults with them. But adults didn't use the Creche because it was for children. There were no laws against it, it just wasn't done.

"I understand that this is unusual, but I have been tied up at council for so long that I hardly see my family and clan. I would appreciate this chance to spend time with them here, in a place where the children can enjoy themselves now that the storm is back upon us. You are welcome to join us, if you want to keep an eye on things.”

The guardian looked torn, but finally bowed and stepped out of the way of the doors. "Of course, Elder. I will keep my position here.”

The children cheered as Lily pushed open the doors and led the way into the playground. Her bemused clan-members followed her, with Maaglieth and a very confused Zieadasra bringing up the rear. John didn't wait for his passengers to disembark. Lily laughed openly as her husband plowed straight into the water, the wave of his impact washing the squealing children from his back. "Oh! It's warm. That's nice.” John purred. Maaglieth was practically shoving dragons aside in his eagerness to follow. It occurred to Lily that as a wild-born, he would never have had the chance to play in the Creche as a child. The brown dragon made up for that now as he took a flying leap into the pool that sent a great cascade of water over John and the children. It didn't take long for the others to join him. Dragons that had played here in their youth enthusiastically chased their nostalgia, wading into the enormous pool. Zieadasra was predictably the last one standing on dry ground.

"Zieadasra, I wouldn't be surprised if the rules here get changed tomorrow. This may be your only chance to do this, so enjoy it while you can.”

Only under a nearly direct order from an elder did the small dragoness finally plunge into the water. As big as the pool was, it wasn't exactly built for this many adult dragons, and they slowly jostled into a ring around the shallow edge of the pool, bunched together to leave the center open for the children to play on the ramps and spires there. Maaglieth ended pressed up against John's left shoulder, and Lily waded over to try to squeeze in on his

right. An annoyed jolt went through her as Nithessi darted in front of her, diving into the spot. A little too bold. Lily fought the temptation to just bowl the young dragoness out of the way for her audacity. Nithessi wasn't being intentionally rude, she had to remind herself. The girl was just infatuated, and unaware that John was most certainly not available. She would have to speak with her later.

"Excuse me Thessi." Lily said gently as she approached.

The smaller dragoness looked awkwardly between Lily and her husband. John gave the girl a blank smile, apparently unaware of the situation. "Of course, Elder." She reluctantly moved allowing Lily to settle down into the spot. A moment later she settled down on Lily's right, shooting sulking looks across at John. Zieadasra ended up bobbing comically on the other side of Maaglieth. The steward was just small enough to not really be able to lie down without submerging herself, so she kind of half-stood, half-floated in the water.

The joyful chatter of her clan, and the happy taunts and cheers of the kids playing above them, couldn't entirely wash away the worries of what she'd learned. But it did soothe her a great deal. Surrounded by her family, immediate and extended, she was reminded of what she did miss about living in Syrsarun. Every now and then one of the youngsters would make the mistake of splashing too close to John. Her husband seemed to take enormous glee in responding. One after another children would dive down, following Ban's example of a cannonball, trying to splash John with the impact and get away. One after another, they were swamped by the rushing waves that John made by thrusting his forelimbs out, coming up sputtering and laughing. Maaglieth joined in occasionally. The smaller male wasn't able to produce the same results, but still succeeded in splashing great torrents of water at floundering targets.

Even Zieadasra seemed to relax after a time, and gave up the attempt to keep her footing. The steward cupped some air in her wings to act as buoys and simply let herself float along on the waves that Maag and John created. The initial excitement calmed after a time. The children focusing on their own games while the adults settled into various conversations with those

nearby. Lily stayed quiet, her own thoughts still lingering on the sealed off tunnels below. It was yet another trouble that she didn't want to deal with, but the afternoon's discoveries had been troubling enough that she couldn't banish them from her mind. To distract herself Lily listened in on the conversations around her. Nithessi had given up trying to draw John's attention and was chattering amiably with the dragons to her other side. John and Maaglieth were engrossed in a conversation about Maag's journeys. He was apparently quite well-traveled, having little care for the normal stigma that came with leaving the islands.

"By far, the least pleasant place I've visited. I traveled the country for perhaps a month, and in that month it was either raining or snowing every day but two. Mirara, the capitol, was interesting. In as much as it served as an example of what decades of indentured servitude could accomplish. They were happy enough to host me at first; everyone is considered equal there, so long as you have gold to spend. They were less pleased when I decided to leave without spending any of mine."

John listened intently. Lily knew her husband was no slouch in his own worldly knowledge. He had traveled as part of his father's business and frequently spent time soaking up stories from the sailors in Wake. It was pale comparison to Maaglieth however, who had apparently visited nearly every continent, save for the frozen wastes of the poles. Curiously she saw that Johnathan wasn't the only one paying attention.

Zieadasra paddled with her legs and tail to maintain position nearby, her ears twitching back and forth to catch every word. She had a strange expression of worry on her face as she listened though. Eventually the young steward sighed and lifted her head.

"Maag," the single word was enough to make Lily blink in surprise. Zieadasra, the trained steward, stiff as an iron rod, using anything other than a full name?

Maaglieth paused in his current anecdote, turning to face the dragoness. He hadn't seemed to notice the slip up. Lily couldn't help but grin as she watched the emotions flick over Zieadasra's face. So that's how it was. The sky-blue

dragoness steadied herself in the water and continued. "Did Elder Yedanathil offer you anything for this...service?" Zieadasra neatly avoided mentioning that that service involved being a spy.

"Oh, yes. I know that she is often at odds with the other clans, but my elder is quite well liked among Ilikess. She was actually offered a generous position as an ambassador, so that I could travel freely with the support of the clan. It gives me some hope that she intends to take a greater interest in the outside world."

Zieadasra took a calming breath. "So she didn't extend an offer of paternity?"

"Ah. No. I'm afraid I would have to turn it down if she did. It would be a cruel thing to force a dragoness to risk her reputation by breeding with a wild-born." He shrugged, his smile slipping for just an instant. "Perhaps some day. I have managed to find quite pleasant company among other males for the time being." He cast his gaze across the pool towards one of the guards that had accompanied them. Renenly, a gold scaled male of some size. "I must admit, Sanjeia has been most obliging in this regard."

Lily felt John jolt stiffly against her side. His time with her had loosened him up quite a bit towards the broader possibilities of sex, but he had come from a place where rumors of deviant behavior could ruin a man. Maaglieth must have noticed as well, for he turned his gaze towards the scarred dragon. "Don't worry Johnathan, I am acutely aware of your commitments. Besides, I fear you are a bit too passive for my tastes. I lean towards more assertive partners."

John quickly shook himself, an amused smirk drifting onto his face. "Honestly, I'm more surprised that it is Ren. He's been standing guard practically all day, every day since he arrived. I don't know how he'd find the time." Pride simmered in Lily at John's words. It took a certain bravery to cast aside the teachings and prejudices of his youth.

Their attention was drawn back to Zieadasra as the steward cleared her throat. "You needn't force yourself on anyone."

She wore a bold mask, but Lily could see the water shivering around her as the young dragoness trembled nervously. "That is, if you are not otherwise bound I would...uh, that is I am...” She visibly steeled herself. "I have not been with a male, and I would like to be with you. If you want, that is.”

For perhaps the first time since meeting him, Lily watched Maaglieth rendered absolutely speechless. Normally so composed, he now opened and closed his mouth several times, no words escaping. "Oh!” He finally managed, his face concerned, "I would very much like to say yes, but are you sure? You know how it might affect your standing, associating with me?”

Zieadasra tossed her head defiantly. "I know that you have shown yourself to be a dragon of good character and admirable intellect. I know that you have shown me a window into the world that I have previously ignored.” She faltered a moment, "I don't know that I will be able to obtain my clan's permission for children just yet, but I would still like to be with you, until I do.”

Maaglieth would be blushing if he were a man. As it was he fluttered his wings nervously, stirring the water. "You are very kind. It would be my great pleasure.” He bowed his head.

John shook, trembling for just a moment against Lily's side before a laugh burst from his throat. He strangled it down as best as he could, but he still ended up hissing and coughing out restrained chuckles. Maaglieth glared at John in insult. "Is something about this amusing?”

"I'm sorry, I really am.” Lily's husband lifted one hand apologetically, trying to straighten his face, and failing miserably. "Please forgive me, I'm not trying to tease, and I wish the two of you many pleasant nights together. But I couldn't help it. You two are normally so unflappable, so sure of yourselves. A moment ago you were openly bragging about bedding, or being bedded by Ren. And now the two of you are flirting like a couple of awkward school children.” He grinned, "It's just with how up-front Lily was with me, and how offhand you talked about Renenly, I assumed that was the way of things. I'm honestly glad to be wrong. It's adorable.”

Lily felt her own face crack into a grin as well. John's first night with her did offer an amusing contrast to Ziea's clumsy proposition.

Zieadasra and Maaglieth were much less entertained, and scowled at the two larger dragons with unrestrained indignation. "And I suppose your first time together was a smooth unrestrained passion?" Zieadasra snapped.

"Well, there were a lot fewer words involved." John chuckled. "At the risk of being too blunt, Lily more or less pinned me down, pulled my clothes off, and asked me if I wanted to fuck."

"I suppose, as it turned out, John prefers more assertive partners as well." Lily added with a shrug and a toothy smile.

The obscene admission shocked both aspiring lovers, but also stole away some of their irritation. Their steward looked almost scandalized, but after a moment the frown faded from Maaglieth's face and he grinned as well, "Perhaps the two of you can someday share the secrets of matrimonial bliss. In the meantime, I think I would prefer to continue my conversation with Zieadasra somewhere more private, so that we may stumble through our courtship together." He bowed to his prospective partner, gently gripping her hand and towing her to the edge of the pool.

"Oh, wait a moment dears!" Lily's exclamation stopped them. "Sorry, I know you are both caught up in the moment, but give a moment of though. You both have tasks your clan has assigned you, and that's Raszeics' guard outside. I don't want anything that could cause you trouble getting back to your clans. Return home with us. We can give you a room where you won't be disturbed. We even have some toys and trinkets you can borrow, if you're feeling adventurous."

Zieadasra's eyes went wide at the embarrassing offer, but after a brief whispered conference, the two agreed with the plan.

It didn't take long to convince the children to come out of the Creche. Having spent the morning at play as well, the lot of them were tired and

hungry for dinner. The mood returning back to the residence was full of good cheer for the time spent together, despite the troubling revelations of the earlier afternoon. Lily kept her word, and offered Maag and Ziea a secluded suite on the far side of the residence where they wouldn't be disturbed. The room hadn't been intentionally designed as such, but the privacy it had offered had lent itself well to carnal activities, and it was already stocked with a variety of romantic aides the two might find useful.

Afterwards the Sanjeia dragons shared a brief meal together, talking over the events of the day. Ban and Laurelie played in a circle with the other children, battling a leather ball back and forth idly as they chattered. Lily noted that a shy gilt-scaled dragoness, that she was fairly sure was Renenly's daughter, huddled close between Ban and Laurelie. Eventually the gathering broke up, dragons drifting away by ones and twos. Ban and Laurelie ended up sleeping sprawled out in a tangle of children, sleeping off the day's excitement. Kisa assured them that she would watch over them for the night, leaving Lily and John to retire to the elder's suite.

John didn't hesitate to plunge onto the cushioned bed, sighing deeply in satisfaction. Lily padded more carefully on the bed, trying not to tread on her husband's wings as she snuggled up against him. John's voice rumbled in a pleasant croon, his chest humming against hers. A moment later he laughed aloud.

"What?" Lily queried with a smile.

"Just everything. The whole day really, but especially Maag and Ziea. I did not expect that."

"You did seem rather tickled by the whole ordeal."

"It's strange, because I know for a fact that they're older than me, but watching them flirt like teenagers was cute. And I admit, it was kind of fun to see them both so flustered. I can almost see why you enjoy tormenting me so much. I hope they're doing okay though. Ziea is quite small. I wonder about the logistics of it."

"Oh?” Lily purred, drawing a single clawed finger across her husband's chest. Now that he mentioned it, seeing John all hot and bothered seemed very appealing at the moment. "So you've spent some time thinking about these logistics?”

"How could I not? She's literally half his size. It's like a shire horse riding a pony.” John teased right back, refusing to rise to her bait.

Lily smiled at the challenge. "Well, if you're that curious we could arrange for some experiments. I know at least one young dragoness that was trying to ride your pony all day long.”

Instead of squirming at the idea, John looked at her blankly. "Thessi? Is that what she was about? She kept asking me about the Battle of Pastock, talking about my scars. I thought she was trying to get combat lessons.”

Lily growled and rolled atop him, pinning him to the sheets as she grinned smugly down at him. She knew her husband, and his composure only went so far. "Oh, she wants lessons all right. She'd let you teach her all night long.” She ground her hips down against his to emphasize her statement. "Just imagine, an innocent, naive young female, twitching and squirming atop you, seeing just how much of you she could take.”

"Lily!” John's finally broke with a shocked gasp.

Victorious laughter bubbled from her throat and she bent her neck to kiss the scars and scales of his chest. She shimmied lower, licking and nibbling on his belly as she went. "Of course, knowing you and the mess you make, she'd probably look like a balloon by morning. We'd have to roll her out.”

"You're actually getting off on this!” His mortified accusation was halfhearted and quickly shown to be hypocritical. As she approached her goal she found his vent already puffy and slick, ready to release his maleness at any moment. His metallic scent was thick in her nose and on her tongue. John was watching her face as she finally stopped with her cheeks nestled between his thighs. "Maybe I should go get her then. You'd probably enjoy watching, you shameless tart.”

Any illusion of the threat being serious was stolen away by his expression. His eyes were wide, locked on hers as he panted lustily and licked his lips in anticipation.

"Oh? A tart? I think you're going to need to come up with a stronger word love. I don't think your average tart would suck your cock right out of your slit.” She ended her sentence with a firm kiss to those swollen lips between his legs, pushing her tongue down into the soft sweltering warmth that concealed his hidden shaft. Holding his gaze with hers, she probed until she met his glans. Tremors rippled through her husband beneath her as she licked and slurped around the soft barbs and folds of his tip, tasting him and the eager fluids he spilled out. With lewd intent she directed the slender tip of her tongue towards the source of those fluids. She found the bubbling cleft in the center of his crown, and burrowed inside, sampling his flavor right from the source. Overcome by the obscene intrusion, John bucked against her, his shaft practically surging out of his vent to nudge insistently against her lips. His insides quivered and quaked against her squirming tongue, even as his thighs clenched around her head to lock her in place.

"Did I say tart? I meant my wanton, shamless, angahhh-” Lily interrupted his flattery by parting her jaws, allowing his cock to emerge directly into her mouth. She carefully sealed her lips around his head and suckled hungrily, coaxing out a great gout of his slick lust. "Angel of a wife.” He finished weakly.

Lily just hummed pleasantly, pulling him in deeper. She drooled in anticipation as his spire grew thicker and longer, oozing his essence across the roof of her mouth. Her tongue curled and probed, continuing to caress the parts of him that remained hidden. Soon his crown was bumping against the back of her mouth, pulsing and spurting desperately. She saw no reason to deny him, and shifted her angle, relaxing her throat. With a wet squelch she devoured him fully, swallowing around his length as it pushed into her gullet. With a bellowing groan John thrust up at her, his tail slapping against her chest. Saturated by the taste of him and overwhelmed by the feeling of the throbbing length in her maw, Lily nearly gave into the feral desire to simply hold him down and nurse on him until he erupted down her throat. John

apparently had other ideas though. He managed to regain his senses enough to take control of his tail. She could feel the tip of it drag down along her belly, prodding and probing. She hesitated just a moment before shifting her hips, moving to help line him up. Soon the smooth scales of his tail rubbed against her sex, gliding through the dripping arousal that had leaked between her lips and smearing her it in a sheen over her scales.

Lily gave a choking gasp and squeezed her eyes shut as his tail found her entrance. John was too far gone to offer much foreplay, but at this point Lily didn't care. Her passage practically swallowed the tip of his tail, her swollen flesh eagerly pulling him deeper. The sex-slick scales of his tail didn't offer much friction, but the girth of it was enough to compensate for that. She moaned around his cock as he stuffed inch after inch and inch into her. Her insides clenched and squeezed as he stretched her and filled her to her limits. She couldn't see it, but she could easily imagine how it looked from past experience: the lips of her vent spread wide and tight, glistening with her arousal. Crammed so full of his tail that her stomach was trembling from the pressure, she still felt her muscles pulsing hungrily for more.

"Oh, Lily!" Hearing her name delivered in a passionate moan was music to her ears. She looked up again, finding John staring down at her lovingly. She grinned, and with a lewd slurp, pulled her mouth off of him. She licked her lips with a smile, pulling in the viscous strings of saliva that had dangled from her snout. For the first time this evening John's maleness was exposed to the air, bobbing with his pulse.

"Still think we should go get Thessi?"

He snorted, and responded to her teasing by flexing the massive curl of tail buried between her legs. Lily couldn't choke back her own groan as the agile mass writhed inside of her. Even as his tail tortured her insides, he curled up on himself so that he could grip her cheeks with both hands. "You are the sexiest, most wicked, beautiful woman I've ever met. Why would I need anyone else?"

He punctuated the statement by leaning in to kiss her, his tongue flicking out to share in the mess he'd made in her mouth. Lily felt her eyes drift shut

in bliss. With her husband lavishing her with attention from both ends, she relaxed somewhat, letting the fiery lust damp down into something more deliberate. Eventually John's lips parted from hers, though he remained curled up with his hands caressing her face. Lily purred, and turned to kiss the head of his shaft instead. Slower now, she resumed tending to his throbbing arousal. It was familiar territory that her tongue and lips explored. She licked all along his crown until his barbs were standing at full attention. She nibbled along the turgid flesh beneath as his arousal dribbled sloppily onto her face. But John was no stranger to his own taste. His tongue dances over her scales, eagerly slurping up each wanton spurt that erupted from his tip, ticking over her lips as she swallowed him once more. As Lily began bobbing her head up and down on his length he even lapped at his own cock wherever it was exposed. And all the while that glorious length of tail twisted and twirled inside of her. He didn't have the leverage to truly thrust into her, but with multiple feet of his tail stuffed between her legs it didn't matter.

Lily felt her breath hitching as she came closer and closer to her peak. He belly clenched in uncontrollable spasms, and her passage was fluttering right on the very edge. She pulled off one last time to gasp out a sentence, "Grab my horns John, hold me down."

His feral grin was the only response he offered before he complied. She had just enough time to open her mouth again before his clawed hands curled around her horns and shoved her almost painfully down onto his cock, burying it so far into her throat that her snout was wedged into his slit. Lily squealed and thrashed as the forceful handling drove her over the edge. Her eyes rolled back as her body clenched up in the throes of orgasm, waves of pleasure crashing over her mind to wash away all other thought, her throat worked on pure reflex, swallowing nonstop around him in desperate desire to taste his release. John didn't keep her waiting long. She could just feel the sensation of his crown swelling and expanding out in a barbed flare that locked him in place before a torrent of cum blasted into her throat, pouring down without end. The taste of his seed on her tongue and the powerful tremors through his frame was almost enough to launch her into another climax, and it was all she could do to keep swallowing and contain the flood that he produced.

It seemed like forever that she floated on that cloud of bliss. Every sense was filled with her husbands presence, his smell and taste absolutely inundating her mouth even as her eyes were locked on the quivering muscles of his stomach. Even her ears were filled with the messy gurgling of her own efforts to drink down his cum. Eventually though her body sagged, exhausted. John had long ago lost his grip on her horns, having fallen back onto the bed in the throes of his own orgasm. Not that it mattered: with the massive flare at the end of his shaft lodged in her throat, Lily wasn't going anywhere. His tail continued to twitch in her sex as he came, drawing whimpers from the dragoness as it stimulated her sensitive flesh. By the time his turgid length stopped throbbing and spurting Lily felt like she had eaten a full meal. She let his softening maleness slip from her mouth, an obscene splash of seed and saliva following it as it slapped back against John's belly. She barely managed to crawl her way back up alongside her husband, wincing as his tail slipped out of sex with another wet slurp.

She collapsed against him, absolutely drained. After a long moment John summoned the energy to wrap one wing around her, squeezing her close. "I love you Lily."

"And I love you." She purred, kissing the top of his head. He gave one last pleasant croon as his eyes drifted closed, and soon fell into a doze against her chest, leaving her awake by herself. For a moment, all she did was sit and look down upon John as he slumbered in her arms. His breath came in gusts against her scales, and soon he was twitching with the random motions of his dreams. Her appetite sated in more ways than one, Lily was tempted to join him, and let sleep claim her. She wanted very much to bask in this loving embrace and let the worries of the day fall away with sleep. But eventually Lililethan's thoughts turned towards the troubling discoveries of the day, and the even more troubling prospect of the next council meeting. She had managed to delay it for a few hours, but she still had plans to make.

She had allowed John to suffer through the council's tests in the hope that it would keep the peace between the clans. But if Yedanathil and Raszeics were going to use the opportunity to plot against her she had to make contingencies herself, and they were already a step ahead. As much as she wished to sit and watch over John, she had things to prepare. Yedanathil and

Raszeics wanted to play dirty. They wanted to bring up internal clan politics to discredit her in the eyes of the council. She could play dirty as well. She had become elder from birthright, but before that she had been the most ruthless general that their people had seen in generations. If the other elders wanted to fight dirty, she would fight dirty. She planted one last kiss on her husband's head before weaving a careful spell, pushing him into a deeper sleep. Finally she pulled herself away from him, moving towards the door. There would still be messengers and servants on call, in case their elder needed something.

The stickiness between her legs and over her face made her pause. A bath first, and then politics.

Dragons of Syrsarun, Part 2

Clan Sanjeia (Elder/Queen Lililethan: emerald green) - Associated dragons: Johnathan, Renenly, Noluleth, Kisayal, Nithessi
Clan Arsothsk (Elder Kyrenic: sky blue flecked with black) - Associated dragons: Zieadasra
Clan Hata (Elder Alalirrel: red with white belly)
Clan Kamvra (Elder Raszeics: black with green bands) - Associated dragons: Irsasz
Clan Siedkess (Elder Ithelashri: forest green)
Clan Karcaith (Elder Ietrithala: solid gold)
Clan Ilikess (Elder Yedanathil: solid white) - Associated dragons: Maaglieth

Johnathan collapsed to the floor of the council auditorium as the threads of the spell finally unraveled enough to lose their grip on him. The magic shattered apart with a small thunderclap as the energy behind it unwound uncontrollably. The spell was familiar, little more than a repeat of a previous experiment. The elder who had cast it, Alalirrel, hadn't seemed particularly enthusiastic either. After a month of testing sunrise to sunset, it seemed that everyone involved was losing patience and interest. Still, despite the fact that he'd encountered the spell before, and the fact that the caster was halfhearted at best, John's defenses were wholly inadequate.

Part of the conditions for the test were that he was allowed to defend himself freely. After all, a weapon wasn't much use if it required a willing participant. Not that it mattered much. Even being allowed to employ counter-magic wasn't much use for John when he was facing mages that had entire lifetimes of experience on him. As he stumbled to his feet though, he noticed that Alalirrel was actually puffing slightly with the exertion of the spell. The white and red dragoness tipped her head slightly as he regained his composure. She spoke in a surprisingly fluent trade cant, not needing any magic to make herself understood. "You are advancing quickly Clan-Mate. If these trials have been useful for nothing else, at least they have made you a great deal more effective at defending yourself."

He nodded and bowed, unable to gather enough breath for speech. He watched the elder retreat to her section of the arena as he considered her words. It was true, he supposed. Being under a constant barrage of hostile magic had given him a great deal of practice in countering spells. It was some consolation at least. Perhaps with a few more years of such rigorous training he would be a match for the elders.

Of course a few more years of this might just kill me, he realized.

The ever-present storm raged overhead, pouring rain and lightning upon the mountainside. It didn't touch the auditorium though. The storm was held at bay by a cleverly constructed canopy that was suspended high overhead, bolstered by protective wards. No one stood immediately, and John took the opportunity to catch his breath and scan the rest of the arena. The other elders all sat in their designation partitions, conferring with their advisors. Most of them wore a translator of some sort, those that couldn't speak John's language, so that they could communicate with him during testing. Most of the audience did as well, so as not to miss what was said by the elders. John would have expected the number of dragons attending would have gone down. After all, nothing particularly interesting had happened in weeks. But instead the size of the crowd had remained relatively stable throughout these trials. If anything it seemed larger than usual today. All the familiar faces were here. Zieadasra stood chatting quietly with her elder. She and Maaglieth had emerged sheepishly from their room the morning after their tryst to share a quiet breakfast together. Any fears John might have had about them being incompatible had been put to rest by the way they sat together, taking every opportunity to touch and preen over one another. When Maaglieth had departed back to his own clan they had spent a good deal of time to say their goodbyes.

Lily sat with her own advisors, listening carefully but keeping her eyes on John. He gave her a restrained smile, assuring her that he was okay. He regretted that they hadn't had more time together yesterday, but Lily had departed before he'd awoken, leaving only a message with the guards that she was out making preparations. She hadn't returned until well after nightfall, exhausted and worried. He had offered what comfort he could, but she fell

asleep in the middle of explaining how she wasn't sure if she'd secured the support she needed. With his attention focused on Lily, John didn't notice that another elder had stepped forwards until Raszeics' snarling voice rumbled over the hushed chatter of the auditorium.

"Elders of the council, I think we can all agree that these tests have stalled." Even wearing a translator the enormous dragon's voice was mangled, as though he was intentionally slurring the foreign words John belatedly turned to offer the elder a bow, only to be ignored as Raszeics continued on. "We are wasting our time here this morning, repeating tests that we already know are useless."

"Are you suggesting that we end these trials?" The bone-thin golden Elder Ietrithala asked skeptically, interrupting the monologue.

Raszeics took the interruption in stride, shrugging casually. "No, entirely the opposite. I suggest we treat this threat with the gravity it deserves. For the duration of these trials we have been fettered, held back by the restrictions imposed by one elder. We have been forbidden from using the very thing that resulted in the transformation of this so-called dragon in the first place. I suggest that we overrule Elder Lililethan and conduct tests using wild magic."

A ripple of exclamation went through the council. Most of the elders appeared shocked at the suggestion, though John thought he caught the faintest hint of a smile from Yedanathil. Lily stood, her voice cutting through the murmur. "We have already established that testing wild magic is pointless. You could establish the exact circumstances and parameters of the original spell and still have an entirely different result. There is a reason it's called *wild* magic, Raszeics. If you want to test it, test it on one of your own clan. Besides, you are perfectly aware that this isn't how it works. Johnathan is a clan-mate of Sanjeia, and so falls under my *sovereign* authority. Unless you intend to redefine the word sovereign, tradition dictates that I alone have final say over what he may be subjected to."

Raszeics didn't appear interested in the technical details of his proposed tests though. Instead he launched in an attack, "You only care about our

traditions when they benefit you, *Lily*.” Hearing the shortened name from Raszeics' mouth, dripping with scorn, made John's blood boil. "When you became elder for your clan, you cast aside tradition so that you could break the breeding treaty you had with my clan. As elder, you cast aside tradition and shirked your duty to your clan to run off into the wilds and settle among humans. You allowed this pathetic half-breed to give you whelps and bound yourself to him in some human custom.” Raszeics turned his glare at John, his furious yellow eyes narrowed with a sneer. "And from what I understand, you have ignored one of our deepest traditions, and allowed him to deposit yet another clutch of his spawn in your belly.”

An unfamiliar rage grew in Johnathan with each insult directed towards his wife. He had only a few occasions in his like to feel raw anger. Now he felt something very much like the instinctive rage he had felt all those months ago in the banquet hall when he'd seen his first demon. The fury was nearly overwhelming, and it was all John could do to keep from launching himself at the enormous dragon's throat. It was only when he heard his own growl echoing in the silence of the arena that he noticed the stunned silence, and a moment later was finally able to process the last accusation that Raszeics had made. Lily's pregnancy. The elder heard his growl, and turned a sneering grin towards John.

"What's wrong, whelp? Does hearing the truth make you angry?”

John forced himself to breathe. They had been warned this was coming. Raszeics was baiting him, mocking him intentionally. The black and green dragon was impossibly large, and John had been the target of enough of the elder's spells that he knew the bastard was no slouch of a mage either. Raszeics was no bloodlusted demon that he could lure into a trap. This monster would tear him apart in a fight. Or at least try, before Lily killed him. He managed to choke off his growl. "You have a strange idea of the truth.”

Raszeics huffed out an indignant laugh. "And my example is made. A wretched freak that can't summon up the courage to defend himself or his mate, lacking even the respect to properly recognize an elder. And you bound yourself to him. A sad state of affairs for Sanjeia. No wonder their clan is in such disarray with such a delinquent elder in charge.”

"That's a strange argument to make.” Raszeics speech was interrupted once more as Kyrenic stood to be recognized. The placid smile on his face would have made Maaglieth proud. But Kyrenic's voice contained none of Maaglieth's mirth. Instead the elder's words were iron hard. "A moment ago you said that she abandoned her clan. Now you say that she'd responsible ruining it?”

Raszeics wasn't so casual about being interrupted again, and took an aggressive step towards the smaller elder. Kyrenic ignored the attempt at intimidation. "It is especially strange considering that by all reports, Clan Sanjeia has been wildly prosperous these last decades. For such a small clan, they have a surprisingly robust population of children, and the trade agreements they have made with other races has added a great surplus of beef and pork to our food-stuffs. I don't think I have to remind anyone that it wasn't so long ago that we were rationing meat when our fishing stocks collapsed.”

"Trade agreements?” Raszeics snarled, "We are dragons. Why are we making trade agreements with lesser races? If we lack food, we can simply take it. Instead we have dragons of our own *royal* bloodline simpering and pandering to secure the most basic provisions. Pathetic.”

"So instead of giving up gold and jewels, which we have in abundance, you would rather risk the lives of dragons?” Kyrenic asked in feigned confusion. "I was too young to fight in the last war, as were all here except Elders Lililethan and Yedanathil, but I am not eager to seek another. Especially for something so trivial as food. Still, your accusation is troubling. Elder Lililethan, is this true? Have you allowed Clan-Mate Johnathan to sire children again?”

John frowned. Something seemed off. Kyrenic didn't seem troubled. If anything he seemed expectant, as though he were reading lines.

Lily stood proudly, lifting her head in defiance. "I have.”

The stunned silence of earlier was replaced by a terrible clamor of angry

shouts. Hearing their venerated eldest confirm the accusation had the entire auditorium on their feet. The shouting drowned out the angry howling of the wind as it whistled through the canopy. Raszeics looked almost disappointed. Had he planned on bringing out evidence and testimony to sully her reputation? The Kamvra elder was quiet for a moment, perhaps deciding on a new plan. Finally he let out a bellowing roar, "Silence!”

Only when the audience had calmed and sat back down did he bark out a coarse laugh. "At least you have the integrity to admit your crimes. As I said: a delinquent elder that is willing to cast aside not only tradition, but our law, whenever it suits her.”

"Pardon me Elder Raszeics, I believe there has been a misunderstanding.” A voice from the audience spoke up now. All heads turned towards the speaker, who dared interrupt the elder for a third time. Kisayal was standing uneasily under the attention, but the governess put on a brace face and continued speaking. "There have not been any laws regarding repeat sires in Clan Sanjeia for nearly a hundred years.”

There was a whirl of whispers in the audience, nearly lost in the noise of the storm. John could only imagine the level of loyalty it must have taken for the entire clan to have kept this fact hidden for so long. The clans of the confederacy tended to keep their internal politics close to the chest, but there was still enough interaction and gossip that any major events quickly became public knowledge. Obviously this had not. Kisa took a steadying breath, but her voice came out only weakly. "I firmly believe that the loosening of our laws regarding the siring of children has been largely responsible for the rapid growth of our clan.”

The first two interjections had rattled Raszeics' rhythm, but this third one drew a dangerous growl from his throat. Before he could respond Kyrenic seized the momentum and stood once more. "What growth is that Kisayal of Sanjeia? By all recent counts, Sanjeia is still the least populous of the clans.” Once more John was struck by the strange expectation in Kyrenic's voice. This seemed scripted. He glanced over at Lily, who simply flashed him a reassuring smile.

"Yes, at the time of the last census it was Elder Kyrenic. It may still be, we won't know until we conduct another census, but I would be surprised if that's the case. As you said, we have a large number of children and adolescents. Of course, we haven't been advertising our growth; we understood that the methods behind it might be difficult for the other clans to accept." She seemed to take some comfort talking to Kyrenic instead of Raszeics, who still stood fuming. "We expected that our elder's decision to relax these laws may be contentious, so in solidarity with her we have asked all the parents of our clan with children under the age of twenty to be present today for the council."

At her words dragons scattered throughout the audience stood. Dozens of them. As they stood they revealed the children that had been sheltering under their wings, hidden from view. John's eyes almost immediately fell on Ban and Laurelie huddled under Renenly's wing, along with his own daughter. After a moment Laurelie reared up, waving an enthusiastic hello to him. It was hard to count the children among the forest of larger dragons, but there were easily two score. John had no idea what a normal number might be, but apparently it was less than this. The elders of the other clans turned and scanned the crowd in awe. Even Kyrenic, whom John was sure had been expecting this stunt, looked surprised. Only Yedanathil kept a neutral expression, but he could see her eyes taking count. It felt dirty, using kids as political props. It made John feel dirty for benefiting from it. That didn't mean it wasn't effective. Kyrenic sat back down, yielding the floor.

Raszeics was silent for a long moment before shaking his head sadly. "This is worse than I thought. Lililethan has managed to spread her perversion to the rest of her clan. How are any of us supposed to trust breeding treaties with Sanjeia, when their bloodlines are all mixed as mongrels? And why would we want to offer our trust when Lililethan has given a fine example for her clan by backing out the treaty her mother made with my own father? My brother's bloodline ended when he died in battle, because she refused to bear his young!"

Lily stood, her face cold. "You keep bringing up that treaty as if you are the victim, Raszeics. But we both know that you're not angry with me out of any love for your brother. I have kept the terms of that agreement quiet, out

of respect for Irsasz, but since you insist on forcing the issue I-”

"Irrelevant arguments, you betrayed my-”

It's wasn't a shout or a voice that cut off Raszeics words, but a terrible force, a wall of noise so loud that it seemed to rip the air.

"YOU WILL NOT INTERRUPT ME!”

John's ears rang and his eyes watered. The canopy above them crackled from the echoes of it ringing off the mountainside, and the dragons nearest her had scattered away in alarm. The other elders stood in their partitions defensively, staring warily at the furious queen. Even Raszeics looked startled, his teeth bared in a frightened snarl. The dragons in the audience quailed under the auditory assault, and John spotted Kisa quickly gathering the children. Lily waited just a moment for the lingering resonance of her command to fade before speaking as though nothing had happened.

"My grandmother did make a treaty with your father, that I would breed with Irsasz. It was an agreement that I was most comfortable with. Your brother stood by my side in nearly every battle I fought. When my grandmother died, and our clan was at a disadvantage, your father forced my mother to renegotiate. Perhaps you recall the added terms? After all, from what I understand it was you that insisted on also being allowed to sire children with me. You, who had not had a single action in combat. You, who had already developed a disgusting reputation for mistreating your mates. But my mother reluctantly agreed. It was all I could do to stall, using the needs of the war to delay the inevitable.”

Once more John felt that fury rise in his chest. Lily had told him very briefly about Irsasz. She had loved him, that much had been clear to John. But all of this was new to him, and knowing now that this black scaled monster of a dragon had been lusting after his wife so long ago only made John hate him more.

"You abandoned your duty!” Raszeics snarled. "Your elder made an agreement, and you did everything you could to sabotage it!”

"I did. And when my mother was killed, and I was made elder, I withdrew from that treaty. I offered your father the original agreement. He rejected me, and I have regretted every day since Irsasz died that I wasn't able to offer him the solace of knowing that his children would survive him. Out of disgust for you." Deep sadness was etched on Lily's face as she spoke.

"It doesn't matter. You were given a duty by your elder, your personal feelings on that duty are irrelevant."

"Is that what you tell the females of your own clan?" Alalirrel's voice broke the staring contest between the two of them. The elder of Clan Hata didn't bother to stand. The council's decorum had broken down enough to make such a formality seem pointless. "How many children have you sired now Raszeics? Twenty? Thirty? From what I hear, you are rather forceful about exercising your right to claim as many mates as you desire."

"My decisions as Elder of Clan Kamvra are not yours to question Alalirrel. I am the scion of the strongest bloodline our kind has ever seen. The females of Kamvra are proud to bear my children."

Alalirrel snorted and spat distastefully. "I'm sure. Very proud. That must be why so many of them choose exile instead. How many have fled your clan again? Do you even know? Because I can tell you that my people have encountered many terrified young dragonesses out in the world, fleeing from your grasp."

Ietrithala nodded in agreement. "We have offered sanctuary to some. I know it breaks tradition to recognize dragons exiled from another clan, but since breaking tradition seems to be the trend today I don't mind admitting it." Her golden scales shimmered as she turned to face the forest green elder seated in the partition next to her.

After a moment Ithelashri shrugged noncommittally. "We have recognized some females that seemed worthy of our clan. We didn't question where they came from."

Raszeics head swiveled as he scanned the elders arrayed against him. Only Yedanathil had not spoken, but when he turned to her for support she just glanced away. Sensing an impending defeat, the black dragon only seemed to grow more furious and reckless. John took a step away, realizing that he was still standing on the center of the rostrum, with the enraged Raszeics far too close for comfort. "My authority as elder is sovereign! You have no right to lure and steal away females from my clan! Those that have fled are exiles, whatever lies they might speak. What use is exile as a punishment, when those that suffer it know that they can simply appeal to another clan for relief? By recognizing those females you have damaged the authority of us all! I demand that you cast them out, or turn them over to their proper clan!”

"No.” Alalirrel's scorn dripped from the single word.

Raszeics snarled and stalked threateningly towards the red and white elder, only for her to come to her feet, along with Ithelashri and Ietrithala. The three elders faced Raszeics without fear, and John realized that Kyrenic and Lily were standing defensively as well.

Alalirrel's voice was amused when she spoke. "What are you going to do Raszeics? Declare war on all five of us?”

"Would your clan even follow you if you did?” Ithelashri asked mockingly.

John eased back away from the rostrum. Raszeics advance had placed him between John and Lily, so John moved towards Kyrenic instead. He scanned the audience. Had Kisa managed to get the children away? With so many dragons shifting and moving he couldn't see them.

"Stop this!” Yedanathil's voice didn't have the sheer force of Lily's roar, but it was enough to draw the attention of the rest of the council. The heavy, cloud-white dragoness stood and padded out into the floor of the auditorium, approaching from behind John. "What are we doing? Talking of war amongst ourselves? There has never been such a thing! And for what? A centuries old treaty between two elders that barely deserve the title?” John had to move once again to keep from getting pinned between the two larger dragons. "One

elder that keeps crucial secrets from the council, who has led her clan away from all the customs that make us who we are? An elder whose questionable decision of mates has brought us this danger that we still haven't found a solution for.” Yedanathil turned her gaze on John, and the look in her eyes left no doubt that she was not his ally here.

"And the other,” she looked up at Raszeics, "who has abused the trust of his clan so terribly that they would choose exile instead.” She shook her head sadly as Raszeics baleful eyes met hers. His face was fixed in surprise. Yedanathil ignored him, turning to face the trio of dragonesses that still stood clustered together. "You three spoke of breaking tradition. And maybe you are right if this is what our confederation has brought us. We have no centralized laws, no ability to police one another's worst impulses. We are a fractured people, when we could be something whole.”

"What are you saying Yedanathil?” Kyrenic asked dubiously.

"I am saying that it is time to change. This confederation is already broken. Falling apart. It has been for generations, and I have proof! Beneath Syrsarun lie miles of tunnel, abandoned by our people as our population shrank in war after war. There you will find monuments to the dead, and all the evidence you will need to know that something must change. I am saying that it is time to cast off this sham of separate clans working together, and instead build ourselves into a true nation, and a people united!”

Stomach churning realization his John. This wasn't an impassioned plea for peace. This was something planned. Yedanathil hadn't ignored Maaglieth because he was a wild-born. She had ignored him because she already knew. They'd only been back for a month. There was no way Yedanathil had orchestrated things that quickly. But here she stood, apparently ready to take advantage of the fracture between the clans. The other elders were speaking frantically with the advisors who had accompanied them, and the audience was back on its feet. Some dragons were flying away, fleeing the increasingly dangerous atmosphere in the auditorium. Others stood in rapt attention. It was impossible to tell how many people had been swayed by her short speech, but a quick glance to Lily showed her to be just as unsettled as John. She gestured for him to come back. Flanked by an elder on either side, John had

to try and circle around the edge of the arena to return to his wife.

"This wasn't our deal.” Raszeics snarled under his breath, just loud enough for John to overhear.

"Shut up fool!” Yedanathil had spoken in draconic, but John had picked up enough of the language to understand the simple command. Yedanathil turned her gaze to him. "Where do you think you're going? This council hasn't dismissed you yet.”

Johnathan never got the chance to respond. Perhaps Yedanathil was a strategic mastermind. Perhaps she had planned for some or all of this. But no plan could account the the unpredictable rage of the enormous black male. Pushed too far and apparently betrayed by his ally, the Kamvra elder launched into motion. A wall of black scales and shredding claws smashed into Yedanathil. Turned away as she was, she hadn't seen Raszeics move until it was too late. Now the Ilikess elder screamed in shock and pain as Raszeics tore into her, his momentum sending them both sliding across the floor of the auditorium. Blood flowed freely from her chest where Raszeics' claws ripped gory furrows, staining her white scales crimson and his scales a darker black. The assault triggered total chaos in the auditorium. Raszeics' and Yedanathil's guards hurled themselves into the fray, as the guards from other clans sprang into positions around their own elders.

Many months ago, in the battle of Pastock, Lily's battlemages had shown the destructive potential of a skilled practitioner. Now he was caught right in the middle of something greater. Spells and counter-spells erupted, spraying fire, lightning, and all manner of energy in every direction. The canopy above them was shredded by a hundred different spells, and the wards upon it shattered, leaving rain to pour down upon them. An explosion of force erupted from Yedanathil, shoving Raszeics off of her, but also slamming into John. The blast knocked him from his feet and sent him sprawling across the ground of the arena. He shook his head, trying to clear his spinning vision, only to have a rippling wave of fire wash just above him, scorching the air with enough heat to sting the scars on his back. Rain drops hissed in the curtain of fire. He gasped from the pain, and forced himself flat to the ground until the fire cleared. By the time he could regain his feet, the downpour had

turned into a cloud of steam thick enough to nearly obscure the sight of Lily pushing past her guards, trying to reach him. Raszeics was already charging Yedanathil again, unfazed by her blast. She caught his neck in both claws, digging into him, but Raszeics was simply too large for the white dragoness to stop. Then Alalirrel was upon him, her claws sunk into his haunches, tearing hunks of flesh from his flanks as she ripped at his exposed back. The enraged black dragon never turned his attention from his victim. His jaws lashed out, snapping around Yedanathil's entire head.

Just minutes ago John had been fighting the temptation to attack the monstrous dragon himself. Now he watched in growing horror as Raszeics savaged his victim, his teeth gripping into the flesh of her face as he repeatedly jerked his head back and then slammed her down against the stone floor of the auditorium. The impacts snapped off the white dragoness's horns, and the wet thuds of her skull impacting the ground made his stomach churn. John turned and fled. Lily was screaming at him, though he couldn't hear her over the bellows of pain. The magical eruptions were indiscriminate, and dragons of all the clans were either fleeing or leaping into the arena to defend their elders. The sudden press of bodies made it impossible for John to make a straight line towards Lily, and he dodged around dragons locked in combat. A flicker of motion from the corner of one eye was all the warning he had, and almost on instinct John tossed himself to one side, tucking his wings and rolling along the ground.

The dragoness that had tried to leap onto his back apparently hadn't expected him to simply tumble away. As she sailed over him she managed to strike only a single searing cut down his back, drawing a pained growl from John's throat. Wheeling around to face him again, the dragoness's legs bunched in preparation for another charge. She was smaller than him, but John was already injured, and drained from the morning of experimentation. Her dappled olive and tan scales were spattered with his blood as she hunched down, and John couldn't tell what clan she was from, though she seemed vaguely familiar. He didn't have time to get to his feet, and instead raked his claws through the stone pavers, ripping up chunks and hurling them at her. He focused on the quickest spell he could, pouring energy into the stone to send them shooting towards the dragoness like crossbow bolts. Her eyes went wide as she dashed forwards into the hail, and tucked her head to

shield her eyes. The missiles tore into her head and neck, piercing scales and drawing spatters of blood. But it didn't stop her attack. Eyes wide with pain and anger she came. She was nearly upon him when a wall of emerald scales crashed into her.

Lililethan did not have the massive bulk of Raszeics, but she had more than enough to crush the smaller dragoness into the stone floor. John heard bones crack, and his attacker screamed in pain. When Lily stood back up, the other dragon did not.

"Let's go John!" She snarled. Her face was fierce, but there was an edge of fear as well. This chaotic melee wasn't safe even for her to linger in. John quickly scrambled to his feet and hurried to her side. Together they backed away towards the Sanjeia guards, who were already skirmishing with Ilikess and Kamvra dragons trying to cut them off. Another of Raszeics brood spotted them, and launched himself towards Lily's back. John spat out a blast of fire, forcing the oncoming male to change course. But John's fire had drawn Lily's attention, and she whirled violently, her tail slicing out like a whip. The attacker caught the blow across his back, and by the way he folded in reverse, John knew his spine had snapped. The dragon fell to the ground, dead or dying.

With his eyes still fixed on the horrible image of the dragon folded nearly in half, John didn't even see the third attacker coming up from behind him. A sudden searing pain on his flank made him scream and fling himself upwards in a flying leap. He kicked out blindly, and felt his clawed feet bite into something solid.

"John!" Lily's roar was accompanied by a slash of magic, and whoever had attacked John howled in agony. John spun to face the hostile dragon as he landed, only to find the poor male collapsed on the ground, clutching the stumps of both forelegs to his chest. The remainder of the limbs lay twitching on the ground. They finally had a clear path to the edge of the auditorium, and safety. But the attackers had succeeded in delaying them.

Raszeics, having apparently finished with Yedanathil, spun around and snapped at Alalirrel. The red dragoness leapt away with a yelp, but her attack

had been effective in at least crippling the massive black dragon's wings. The enormous dragon bled from dozens of wounds, and was separated from them by dozens of skirmishing dragons now, but as he spotted John and his wife there was insanity in his eyes. With a bellowing roar, Raszeics cast a spell.

John had experienced the effects of a wild spell before, but only as a human. Now with the ability to feel threads of magic much more keenly, John could witness it unfold from Raszeics like a living thing. It lashed out in all directions, seeming to feed off of the magic in the arena, growing larger, distorting the air. Whenever it touched one of the combatants, the dragon would drop to the floor in seizures, screaming and coughing bloody foam. Other dragons noticed this new threat, and tried to counter it, slicing out at the wild spell in an attempt to sever it. But the wild spell ignore all normal rules of magic, and every counter spell only seemed to feed it more. It followed the trails of defensive magic, catching up the dragons that had cast them. Nothing was stopping it, and it was expanding too quickly to escape. John looked at his wife in panic, fearing not only for her, but the children she carried. He had made his decision before he knew there was one to make. He'd never been tutored in wild magic, Lily had considered it too dangerous until he was more experienced. But he had watched Raszeics' spell, and could sense the source that he had tapped from. He had only a moment to open that source, and guide it into a command.

Save us all.

Another living spell erupted from him, darting out and smothering the battlefield. It clashed with the Raszeics' spell, and they twisted together, feeding from one another in a catastrophic loop. The air grew thick, too thick to breath, like they had all been trapped in amber. A terrible screeching whine deafened him, and as he watched, reality shattered.

The entity existed in a storming void. It had no eyes to see with, and no ears to hear with, but that didn't seem to matter. Fractal images erupted in an infinite array. An impossible, insane flood of sight and sound unfolded simultaneously, overlapping and blurring into one another too fast for any of them to make sense. It was little more than a blur of color and noise as it

poured into the entity, wiping out all thought or sense of self. Familiar voices and faces blended with the rest, until they became impossible to tell apart. The entity was sinking in a sea of information, only there was no surface to swim towards, only more madness. Then something made contact. Tiny flickers of clarity and memory flashed into the entity as another presence brushed briefly by it.

"Johnathan." The single word resonated like a drum, a lifesaving breath of air a drowning man. A flicker of identity returned. Johnathan, he was Johnathan. He reached out in the maelstrom, desperate to reconnect to that other presence. An eternity passed, and then once more, contact. A single hazy memory of an exhausted emerald dragoness, beautiful and panting beneath him, her body still quivering from their coupling. He clung on, wrapping himself up in this other castaway, and it responded in kind. Tangled together, more and more memories poured through that connection, blocking out the delirium of the void. Memories of his life together with this other being streamed by. Lililethan. And not just his memories of her, but hers of him. Mirror images, blurred together.

Lililethan. Them on their first night together, the naked skin of his back pressed against the scales of her chest as they lay together to watch the stars wheel by overhead. He lay against her in growing infatuation, fascinated by this remarkable woman that had seduced him. She lay with his weight upon her chest, smiling outwardly, but sad at the knowledge that this was a fleeting encounter. That he would have to return in the morning. For both their sake.

Liliethan, her emerald scales glittering with salt spray as she flew low over the sea, laughing at him as they shared their first flight together. He watched her in awe as she cut graceful curves through the water with the tip of one wing, putting the finest clippers to shame. She watched him with a slowly burning passion. She hadn't expected him back in her life, certainly not like this, but she couldn't imagine it being any other way.

Lililethan, his Lily, laying back into the soft earth on a secluded hillside, his body pressing into hers. Earlier that day she had told him that she had decided. She was ready for a family, and she wanted it to be his. Now she writhed beneath him, her face all smiles and moans. Lily breathed in his

scent, moaning out in joy as his body ground into hers, bringing her pleasure ever higher. She had waited so many years, and she was ready. Her stomach fluttered, not simply from the intensity of his motions inside of her, but with the comfort of knowing that she would soon carry his children. Their children.

Lily, laying in the cushions of their bed, exhausted and overjoyed at the same time, cradling two mewling children to her chest. Her body still ached from the delivery, but John was beside her, offering his comfort, whispering his admiration and love to her as she tenderly licked clean their newborn son and daughter. She watched with pride as be bent his neck, kissing each child delicately on their tiny head. "Say hello to your children John."

Lily was here with him. He was here with Lily. They clung together as the waves crashed over them, tumbling them, submerging them. But it didn't matter. They could not drown when they could breath for one another. A pressure, a forced order, descended down upon them. The maelstrom slowed, the images resolving, taking shape into something recognizable, even as John floated without form like a ghost.

A moment frozen in time. An auditorium in wreckage. Nightmarish images of twisted and broken dragons laying motionless on the ground, illuminated by curtains of fire and the harsh glare of lightning. Others stood locked in combat, the stasis making the scene appear like nothing more than an incredibly real diorama. The battle in the auditorium suddenly came to the surface. The chaos, the noise, the carnage. They were no comfort to John, trapped now as he was in this strange limbo. The motionless vista offered at least one solace; the children were no where to be seen. They had departed with Kisa before the fighting had started. John found himself looking at himself. His body was huddled against Lily's, just as they they clung together now. In the strange tableau of motionless dragons, he could trace the intricate ropes of magic wrapped around them both. Lily's face was grim and resigned, while his own was fixed in stupefied terror.

Incongruous humor washed through him. *I hope Lily can't see my expression. I'll never live it down.*

Then something moved on the battlefield. It started as nothing more than a hazy wisp of a shape, but rapidly defined itself into something more, a familiar dragon that definitely did not belong. A dragon that had died long before John was born.

Irsasz stepped out onto the floor of the auditorium. He towered over even Raszeics as he paused to look sadly into the frozen, rage-maddened eyes of his sibling.

"How could you have fallen so far little brother?" His sonorous voice asked the question honestly, not as a rhetorical exercise. To John's surprise, there was a response. A confused jumble of emotions that echoed from somewhere in the timeless space. Were there others here with them? He couldn't see them, but he could sense faint traces of panic, of curiosity, and of anger.

"So many lives ruined. So much pain caused. You have much to atone for. If you can atone." Irsasz bowed his head. "I will help, if I can."

Irsasz turned, moving to stand in front of Lily's motionless body. A sad smile spread across his muzzle. "You have always been a rock. An anchor for those that needed you. I am glad to see that hasn't changed. I am sorry for all of this, but you need to see. All of you need to see the truth, and there was no other way."

The frozen image of the auditorium shattered, melting away, and for a brief instant John feared they would be cast back into the void. Instead new memories streamed into him, memories that belonged to no one alive

"Please bear with me, these memories are old, collected from many sources. It is hard to make them mesh."

A different place, in a different time. Dragons flew here, but not dragons as they existed in Syrsarun. These dragons were primordial things. Titans of power and size. They ruled all the sky and everything beneath it. When they spoke, their language was violence. When they clashed, the forces they unleashed made the world tremble. Magic as John knew it was not the

creation of energy, but the direction of it. A spell had to draw power from something. Most spells could draw what they needed from the environment, pulling heat or friction or momentum from sources passively. More powerful spells needed a greater source. But these dragons broke down the very fabric of the world, shattering matter to release spells of impossible scope. Their battles leveled mountains, or drew new ones from the earth. Continents were split asunder and the lesser creatures of the world cowered lest they draw the attention of the dragons above.

But these colossal releases of energy didn't come without consequence. On rare occasions the incredible power they wielded twisted and tore at space and time itself, opening up gateways to something else. An abyss where there was no time or space. An endless void of screaming insanity, where the physical laws of nature didn't exist. On even rarer occasions an unfortunate dragon would fall through into the void and became something else. Something terrible.

Irsasz' voice resonated again, "Falling into a realm that the mind cannot comprehend, they lost their minds. In that void, time doesn't exist. Or it exists all at once. The debate is ongoing. Regardless, they are so far beyond sanity that to classify them as mad is insufficient. They created their own twisted simulacrum of reality. A place where they could attempt to recreate the life they once knew. But deranged as the are, their creations came out warped. A mockery of life. Their creations are the creatures you now call demons. Eventually, for reasons unknown, they grew bored of their fake world and decided they wanted ours."

Another memory, full of rage and fear, looking out on a conflict that made the skirmish in the arena look like a stage play. Millions of mutated creatures scuttled, crawled, and flew across a battlefield that spanned a continent. Dragons pushed them back with torrents of magic that consumed demons by the tens of thousands. But even these titans of magic couldn't fight something infinite.

"The first gateways and incursions were small and easily countered. But we were complacent, assuming that these tormented husks could pose no threat. We continued to brawl and fight amongst ourselves, not understanding

that it was our own magics that allowed the portals to open."

Now John overlooked a great conference. Thousands of dragons gathered together, distrusting of one another, but forced by the losses of war to work together. At the head of the conference stood a green dragoness so immense that even other dragons bowed to her. She stood with the air of a queen, and a rack of eight horns curled from her skull like a crown.

"It was Lililethan's distant ancestor that recognized the threat. The original Sanjeia. She forced others to listen, and eventually wrangled the feuding dragons into something resembling cooperation. We followed her into battle, and for a time we seemed to beat back the tide. But only for a time."

Another battle, now full of nothing but fear. They were losing, dying, the demons washing over the defending dragons. Gateways opened seemingly at random now, disgorging more demons onto the field. Sanjeia led her army in a desperate retreat and an entire continent fell to the enemy.

"It was almost too late before we realized that our reckless use of spells had changed something. We had broken the barrier into the void too many times, and made our reality permeable. We were lost. There was only one option for survival. One of great sacrifice."

A circle of dragons flew over the ocean, far from any land. Together they worked, carefully managing their power so as not to risk another rift. Slowly, over the course of days and weeks they pulled a chain of islands from the sea floor. Mountains of burning rock emerged and cooled. A sanctuary for those too young or too weak to fight. A place where they could live on and rebuild. Sanjeia left her own daughter to lead the survivors, and then departed.

Now the collective of dragons stood upon on open field. Not a field of battle, but a field carved into enormous glyphs. Symbols to help in one massive cooperative spell. One after another, the dragons on the field poured their energy into the collective spell, and one after another they snuffed out like spent candles.

"They formed a new barrier. One that could only open from our side. It

cost them their lives, and the power they poured into it diminished even those dragons that survived. It worked and for eons the world seemed safe. But the void has infinite time, and though it could not longer send its minions freely, it could still exert influence in our world. Eventually the threat of demons was forgotten even among dragons, and the void found other pawns to manipulate."

A new war, but this time with familiar faces. Battle after battle blurred before John. Lily and Irsasz, in the vanguard of dragons fighting against demons once more. Lililethan and her grandmother leading other dragons in an escort, guarding prisoners of war. The prisoners turned on them in the night, drawing a summoning circle with their own blood and conjuring a skittering spider-like demon that poisoned the Sanjeia matriarch in her sleep. Lily, in her rage, led the other dragons in burning the prisoner camp to ash when they found the body. The dragons took no more prisoners of war after that.

Then Lily and her mother, responding to pleas for help from refugees of the war, only to be ambushed by possessed humans among the refugees. Harassed by those possessed human, neither dragon noticed the demons burrowing through the ground until Lily's mother made the mistake of landing. Massive worms with mouths of grinding teeth and bone burst from the earth beneath, latching onto the elder Sanjeia dragoness, ripping her apart as Lily watched and screamed from overhead. Lililethan offered no more mercy to refugees in the years afterwards. Every human, man, woman, or child, was a target for her fire and spells.

And finally Irsasz himself. He stood before Lily as she sadly explained that she could not be his mate, could not bear him children. He hadn't known that his father had changed the agreement to include his brother, and the rejection made him hurt, and angry. He began volunteering for missions without her. One mission went wrong, a reconnaissance trip to seek out the last remaining forces of their nearly defeated enemy.

They spotted a small group of cavalry and attempted to follow it under the mistaken impression that they were another group of scouts. But as the cavalry fled into the woodline, hundreds of flying demons emerged from the

trees. They shredded his wings, forcing him to the ground. Cut off and surrounded, he cast one wild spell in an attempt to save himself, or at least take as many demons with him as he could. But as Irsasz poured himself into the wild spell, something happened. It didn't result in the massive destruction he had hoped for. Instead it pulled on him, his body unraveling as his spell dragged him away from the reality he knew, into some other place. This limbo.

"I turned to wild magic as you did, Johnathan. And like you, I didn't truly understand what it was."

Suddenly they were once more among the auditorium, Irsasz' incorporeal shape smiling wryly at them. Behind him, barely visible, were the faded forms of other dragons moving among the frozen scene. They slowly calmed the tangled weave of Raszeics' and his own wild spells. The massive snarls of living magic had absorbed all the other spells in the arena, and the energy they contained couldn't simply be made to disappear, but the ghosts of these dragons manipulated it like a sculptor would manipulate clay.

"It turns out, not every dragon that went through those gateways fell entirely into the void. Some of us managed to cling to an anchor of this world, and are stuck instead in a sort of limbo. We exist halfway as ghosts in this world, and halfway as something else. We are limited in our power, but we still have some tricks to play. Wild magic is one of them, for it isn't truly wild. Wild spells do not require the same input of power as other spells because they draw power from us, and those of us trapped here can can extend our influence through them. As I did today. And as I did ten years ago, the day that you met Lililethan."

Shock was a mild way of describing the emotion that John felt. He wanted to ask questions. They needed to know more! But floating formless and voiceless, all he could do was rage internally.

"I know you have questions, and I wish I had time to answer them. I wish I had time to take you through all of our collected memories. I wish I could tell you why you are being hunted Johnathan. But I don't know. We are not omniscient, and time here isn't endless like it is in the void. There are still

things we don't understand, or that I don't have time to explain. I can only hold you like this so long without risking trapping you here with me. And the longer you stay, the more likely we are to draw their attention.” Irsasz looked up, and John saw them then. Or saw *it*. A twisting mass of nonexistence, a nothingness overhead, like a hole cut out of reality.

"They cannot pass into our world, but the void remains close enough for them to peer through. They exert influence even here in Syrsarun. Pluck on our worst impulses and suppress our better ones to guide us as pawns. They have little power, but great reach. You must all guard yourselves against this as best you can. Now I must send you back, and undo as much of this damage as I can. ”

Irsasz went silent, a look of concentration on his face. The ghosts in the arena began directing all the magic they had liberated into the injured dragons. Wounds sealed, limbs straightened, and bodies that had been on the verge of death filled with vitality. One by one, as the bodies were reformed, presences that John hadn't even felt until now departed, formless minds being cast back into their mortal coils. As he worked, Irsasz began to fade, appearing less solid with every passing moment.

"Lililethan,” Irsasz voice was strong, even though he began to look more and more like the faint shades behind him, "I have always loved you. You were the anchor that saved me, as you were Johnathan's anchor today. I do wish we could have shared a family, but I am happy that you have found one now. Please remember that.” He paused, and smiled happily. "Besides, in a way, your family is like my family as well. I am proud that I could help bring Johnathan back to you, and I cherish the children that you have together.”

John could feel the tangled emotions of his other half as Lily heard his words. Sadness and regret, but above that, a great relief and surge of happiness. Then, as Irsasz turned back towards the arena his smile became mischievous. "Hmm, still so much left. I think I know what to do with it. Farewell Johnathan and Lililethan.”

There was no transition between this limbo and reality. One moment John was watching Irsasz channel the remainder of the lingering magic into his

and Lily's own bodies, and the next the floor was rushing up at him as his legs went rubbery. A startled grunt was all the sound he could make as his chin and chest thumped into the stone, the dull throb of impact assuring him quite firmly that he was back in his physical body. A moment later Lily staggered to the ground beside him. Rain poured down on them, and the rumble of thunder blended in with the ubiquitous the groans of dragons. Some were simple noises of disorientation like John's, others actual groans of pain. The ghosts had managed to manipulate the destructive spells hovering in the arena into some form of healing, but it hadn't been enough to completely clear the carnage of the arena.

John winced and looked around, trying to clear the befuddled mess in his head. All around them, dragons still writhed and squirmed on the ground in various states of injury. The male that Lily had amputated still lay on his back clutching his legs to his chest. The limbs were reattached, but limp and atrophied now. The dragon that she had slapped out of the air with her tail lay absolutely still, aside from the wind of the storm fluttering the edges of his wings. He looked to his wife.

"Lily, are you all right?" John's voice came out as a croak.

She took a long moment to respond. Her eyes were fixed straight ahead, staring into space. Tears steamed down her face, mingling with the falling rain. When she finally did respond her voice was quiet, "I'm all right John. Can you stand? I want to get out of here."

It took several attempt for Johnathan to get his legs under him. His vision swam and his head spun, but looking around, he didn't see any immediate threats. The few dragons that had managed to get back on their feet stood with dazed looks. Even Raszeics sat slumped and subdued, his eyes unfocused. Blood still dripped from his wounds, apparently untouched by the healing the others had received. Yedanathil was still sprawled in the middle of the arena, moving slowly, but not on her feet. The other elders were in various states of confusion. Lily struggled up as well, and did her own scan. After a moment John's wife seemed satisfied that no one else was going to threaten them and let herself lean against him. John in turn leaned back, allowing their weight to support one another.

"Renenly and Noluleth are over there.” John mumbled, nodding towards a nearby ramp up out of the auditorium. The two Sanjeia guards were reeling, still surrounded by a group of equally disoriented Kamvra dragons. Staggering drunkenly against each other, he and Lily stumbled towards the familiar faces. No one offered any challenge, and even the Kamvra guards stumbled out of the way on wobbly legs. They had nearly reached the Ren and Nol before a tremulous call stopped them. "Elder Lililethan!”

Zieadasra's voice made both John and his pause, turning to look back at the young steward. The robin blue dragoness had one wing stretched up and wrapped partially around her elder's shoulder for support. The other wing hung crooked and limp across her back. Kyrenic carefully limped along, supporting his scion even as he favored one back leg. Irsasz' healing had not completely removed the blackened and swollen burns that ran up Kyrenic's left hind-leg. Zieadasra was frantically searching the auditorium, and terror was clear on her face. Pangs of sympathy went through John. Ziea had likely not seen bloodshed in her life, sheltered here in Syrsarun. It was a strange ache, knowing that their loyal steward had lost some form of innocence today. The two Arsothsk dragons approached close enough to speak quietly, and Ziea reflexively tried to drop into a bow, gasping and abandoning the motion when it jostled her wing.

Kyrenic looked at his great grand-daughter in concern for a moment before looking up at Lily. "I'm going to assume that what I just experienced was not a bout of temporary insanity, and that we all witnessed the same thing?”

"You mean Irsasz and his friends miraculously appearing from beyond the grave and saving all our lives?” Lily answered dryly. Her voice was still hoarse with emotion.

"Ah. Yes, that would be it.” He struggled for words for a moment. "Elder Lililethan-”

"Kyrenic this is not the time for formalities. If you have a point, get to it.”

Kyrenic drew back in surprise, but nodded slowly and frowned. "The two

of you have not received fair treatment or respect since you returned to Syrsarun. For the part I played in that, I am sorry. I did not believe your story at first, about Johnathan being a human. Even once you had convinced me, I did not understand your decision to be with him. I supported you today out of distaste for Raszeics more than any compassion for you. But having seen the two of you together, through your own eyes, I understand now." The elder finished by bowing slightly in respect to Lily, then to John.

But Johnathan was somewhat nonplussed by the words. "The two of us together?" He asked curiously.

Kyrenic nodded. "The visions? Those memories of the two of you on the beach? The memories of your children's birth?"

"Ah." John replied lamely. He had assumed that the others caught up in that otherworldly place had seen their own memories. He supposed he should have been bothered by the fact that half of Syrsarun had seen such an intimate look into their lives, but standing surrounded by the pleas and groans of the wounded, John couldn't bring himself to care.

"I know that you must desire to leave here. I can't blame you, especially now. If that is your decision, then go with my blessings, but I feel I must implore you for your aid one more time."

"What aid?" Lily asked warily.

"Assert your authority as queen. We have been attacked. We have been under attack this whole time, unaware of the threat. And with the visions that Irsasz provided stirring everyone to paranoia, we are going to need leadership now more than ever. I fear that if you leave, others will use this confusion to their advantage." He looked pointedly over to where Yedanathil was struggling along with the help of several guards, limping away from Raszeics as quickly as they could.

John swallowed. Kyrenic was right. As much as he wanted to return home as quickly as possible and get away from all of this, he knew that the clans of Syrsarun would be reeling. The right leader now could make all the

difference. He lifted one hand and placed it gently over Lily's. It was her choice to make. His wife stirred at the contact, looking down at him. "It's your home love, even if it's a strange one. I'll be with you here, if that's what you decide."

He felt her tremble just slightly against his side, and she visibly swallowed. "Fine," she sighed finally in defeat. "Just until we get this mess settled."

She cleared her throat and raised her voice to be heard across the auditorium once more. "Elders of the council," heads snapped up, dragons in various states of disarray looking up in alarm in case this was some new threat, "in light of the events of today, I am claiming my authority as Queen to take temporary control of the clans."

Yedanathil jerked upright, apparently ignoring her wounds to glare across at Lily. Her face was still a bloody mess, looking more like ground beef with white scales glued on, but her eyes were bright and hard. She voiced no complaint though and John felt a certain vindication in that. Raszeics didn't even move.

"Elder Raszeics of Clan Kamvra; you have openly attacked another elder at the council. I am placing you under arrest." Raszeics looked up blankly and nodded. John couldn't help but wonder if all the magic had somehow addled the black dragon's mind.

"Elders Alalirrel and Ietrithala, may I ask for some of your guards to help escort Raszeics into confinement? Renenly, Noluleth," She faced her own guards, "Could you please assist them?"

Reluctant to depart their elder so soon after the violence, the guards had to swallow their protests before moving to comply. Soon Raszeics was being led away by a contingent of more than a dozen dragons. Lily waited and watched until the disgraced elder was out of the auditorium. "Those of you from Clan Kamvra, I ask that you hurry to choose your representative for the next council. But choose carefully. My patience for reckless aggression and blustering is at an end. We will meet the morning after next. The rest of you, any that are able bodied please assist in transporting the wounded into

hospital. Any of you with experience in organic magic, the healers may need your assistance if you are able to provide it.”

He watched with amusement as dragons snapped to follow her commands. Given some form of direction, the chaos and confusion soon shaped into an orderly movement of wounded dragons. Any amusement died as he saw those that were not moving. There were not many, but here and there around the wreckage there lay pitifully crumpled forms, dragons that had been killed outright in the fighting. John stood side by side with Lily as she oversaw somber operations. More dragons trickled in from the city as news of the day spread, and their queen quickly ordered them to assist, rather than stand around gawking.

All the additional help sped up the process, and soon the auditorium was nearly cleared of wounded. A friendly face bobbed among the crowd: Maaglieth had arrived at some point, and now searched the auditorium frantically. It was a small bright spot of joy for Johnathan to watch the brown male reunite with Zieadasra. The two of them spotted each other and Zieadasra limped away from her elder, letting Maaglieth hold her and fuss over her. Kyrenic looked down at the Ilikess dragon suspiciously for a moment before a thoughtful look came over his face. Zieadasra's elder shrugged, and apparently decided not to comment.

Only when the last injured dragon had been carried away and the last of the dead had been collected by their clans did Lily speak again. "I'm returning to my residence. Anyone who needs to reach me can find me there. Zieadasra, seeing as you are injured, I am relieving you of your duties as steward until you are recovered.” She turned, as though to walk away, then paused. "Oh hell with it. Kyrenic, I know this is internal clan business, but I'm butting in anyhow. Zieadasra may seek your permission for children with Maaglieth, if she hasn't already. I can attest to his character, and I recommend you accept her request.”

Kyrenic looked own at his scion with a curious expression while Zieadasra looked like she wanted to crawl into a hole. But Lily wasn't done yet. "Zieadasra, with all this mess, I don't know how things stand between the clans. If you need a private space, my door is always open to you.”

Zieadasra couldn't meet Lily's eyes as she replied, "Thank you Elder Lililethan.”

With the immediate concerns taken care of, Lily and John bid farewell to the Arsothsk dragons and moved towards the edge of the auditorium, flanked now by several more Sanjeia guards. They dared not take flight in the raging storm, and instead made their way through the mountain towards their home. Syrsarun was in an uproar as news of the events spread, and the dragons running to and fro slowed their progress, but no one interrupted them.

Despite all the events of the day, the violence, the near-death experience, the psychotic trip through a limbo with a ghost as their guide, and even the burning pain from the fresh cut on his back, John felt a strange peace with the way things had turned out. The council was in shambles, and there was no telling what might happen in the coming days, but somehow things felt better than they had the day before. One thing still itched at him though, something nearly forgotten in the aftermath. The final view of Irsasz channeling all that tangled magic into John and his wife, in the moments before they had been returned to reality. He kept silent about it until they had safely arrived at the entry hall to the Sanjeia residence. Before they went inside and were faced with the business of dealing with her clan, John stopped his wife. Sensing that they might want a private conversation, their escort discreetly passed inside.

"Lily, just before Irsasz sent us away, he was doing something with our bodies. Did you see?”

Lily frowned, looking concerned for just a moment. "I had almost forgotten that. Let me look at you John.”

He stood still as she examined him, feeling gentle touches of magic brush over him. "Do you feel anything different?”

He focused his thoughts inwards. It didn't take long for him to sense it. It wasn't a spell, or anything obvious. Rather more like an appendage that existed only in figment. Like a finger, or a hand, that he knew he could flex if

he tried. "Um, yes. There's this feeling. It's hard to explain. Like I have a trigger waiting to be pulled, but I don't know what it does.”

She nodded, her face fixed in a frown. "I feel the same. Best not to play with it for now, until we have a safe place to study it.”

With the matter decided, Lily turned away. But John couldn't leave it at that. He reached up to place a single hand on hers to stop her, moving in front of her to look in her face.

"Love,” John asked softly, "are you really all right?” He didn't know what else to say. Those memories had been hers, and he couldn't imagine having to relive them so vividly.

Lily froze. Her hand trembled under his, and her muzzle split in a grimace of deep pain. Tears welled up in her eyes once more. Lifting his hand from hers, John leaned back and lifted both arms, pulling her into his chest. Lily lay her head over his shoulder, leaning fully into him. He ignored the way it pulled on his fresh wounds and held her tightly as she wept in his embrace. Long seconds passed with her tears steaming down his back before she finally answered. "I'm not all right John. I've done so many things wrong. I spent so much time trying to forget it all.”

Minutes flew by as he held her. At some point John heard the doors to the residence open behind them, and then quietly close again. Still he held his love. Until her tears had passed and her wracking sobs had slowed into a gentle breathing. Finally she pulled back just enough to look down into his face. A weak smile split her face. "I don't know how you put up with me. I'm a mess.”

"Maybe, but you're my mess.”

She laughed, the sound like a balm for his worries. "I'm not all right, but I think I will be. Now come on, we need to get you patched up. Didn't I tell you no more scars?”

The storm had finally raged itself out over the mountains of Syrsarun, leaving behind a clear and crisp day for their council meeting. Its rain had managed to wash away most of the blood from the arena before it had broken, although the shattered stone still hid small traces of dried ichor among the cracks and pits. Nearly half of the dragons that had been there the day of the fight had been injured in some way. Seven had been killed. Three from Kamvra had died, two from Ilikess, and one each from Arsothsk and Hata. Lily felt blessed that none of Clan Sanjeia had been injured too badly, although John bore two fresh new scars.

Most of the elders wanted nothing more than to seek comfort with their clans and recover, but they had decisions to make. Decisions that Yedanathil seemed intent on dragging out as long as possible. Lily very much wanted to the fat dragoness to shut up and sit down as Yedanathil interrupted again. "I cannot believe that you are defending that monster. He nearly killed all of, right here in this arena, and you want to offer leniency?”

John lay next to her, sharing her expression of exasperation, gazing around the arena absently as Yedanathil ranted on. The auditorium was packed this afternoon, with an audience that sprawled out of the designated area and spread up the mountainside. It seemed like the entire city had turned up to watch. News about disastrous council meeting and the strange spirit journey afterwards had filled the halls of Syrsarun. It irked Lily somewhat to know that potentially hundreds of dragons had received such an intimate look into her and John's life. Even if it had helped sway them to her side.

Over the previous day of rest, the other elders, including the new representative for Kamvra, had approached her privately, pledging their support for her authority as queen. With the backing of six of the seven clan she had all the authority she needed to make unilateral decisions, but that wouldn't help heal the rifts that had opened. The dragons of Syrsarun didn't need a dictator; they needed unity. So she let Yedanathil rant, even though no one seemed interested in what she had to say. She had toned out the other dragoness so much that she almost didn't notice that Yedanathil had finally fallen silent.

Belatedly Lily stood to respond. "Listen, I'm not saying that we should

forget what he did. I'm not even suggesting that he remain in place as the elder for Clan Kamvra. I am saying that we were explicitly told that we were being manipulated by outside forces. Perhaps we should take that into consideration. You argue that death or exile are the only punishments. I argue that we've already seen enough death this week, and I'd rather have Raszeics here under watch than out there where he can get up to who knows what."

"So you want to just keep him imprisoned? For how long? How many years is a worthy punishment for the deaths he caused? Do you expect us to keep him confined for centuries? This is the monster that plotted against you!"

Lily sighed, unable to even summon the energy to be angry. "Yedanathil, that is not a road you want to go down. Raszeics has been surprisingly forthcoming in his confessions, so I would avoid bringing up the subject of plots if I were you."

It was partially a bluff. Raszeics had remained passive and cooperative, but something seemed wrong in his head. He responded to questions in a dreamlike state, often providing only vague information before he wandered off on some tangent. Still, Yedanathil didn't know that. The white dragoness's eyes went wide, and after a moment she sat back down.

"Two days ago you talked of unifying our people. I don't think beginning with executions is going to help in that. You may be right in the fact that we need a centralized government and laws, but we are not there yet, and right now the punishment of a dragon is under the laws of his or her own clan. Clan Kamvra has been wronged by Raszeics as much as anyone and I am comfortable allowing them to decide his punishment."

The new representative for Kamvra was one of Raszeics previous mates, a subdued dragoness of moderate size and pristine red scales. She held no love for the dethroned elder, and nodded in silent agreement to Lililethan's words.

"Lililethan," Kyrenic spoke up, "do you actually mean that? About a new government."

She shrugged, "Maybe. I don't know if an entirely new government is necessary, but Yedanathil was right about one thing: what we are doing now isn't working. The tunnels she mentioned are real, as are the monuments, and they show plenty of evidence that our system has been failing." Lily didn't mention that it had been Maaglieth that showed her the tunnels. No sense stirring up trouble for the young male. But Yedanathil didn't seem to want to accept even this olive branch.

"I suppose you would be queen under this new government? Queen of two nations?" Her dubious tone made her opinion on the idea clear.

Lily recoiled in distaste. "I am currently trying to pass on the crown of my own country so that I can spend more time with my family. I didn't even want to be here in the first place. I certainly don't want *another* crown. I can make recommendations and help guide the process, though if you're asking for my suggestion as to candidates, Kyrenic comes to mind first."

Kyrenic looked at her in shock and shook his head frantically.

"Or Maag." John mumbled under his breath.

Oh, that would tweak Yedanathil terribly, to have such a low ranking male of her own clan recommended over her. But Maaglieth sat happily in the audience, leaning in to whisper with his new mate, as Zieadasra stifled a laugh. Lily didn't have the heart to drag them into this.

"In any case, there's no need to make any decisions on it today. Forming a government that works takes months or years. You are welcome to come to the Blazing Coast if you want to consult with my magistrates and ministers. In fact I would recommend that you all observe as many nations as possible. There are a great many permutations of government, large and small, that we could learn from. Perhaps through this observation, we can develop something more fitted to the dragons of Syrsarun."

"We?" Alalirrel asked curiously. "Does that mean you are going to assist in this?"

"Yes," Lily responded with a great heave. "As much as I want to go home to laze on the beach, I am still elder of my clan and I will make sure they are represented if we are deciding something so major. But not today. Not until I've had a chance to go home and make sure my country hasn't burned down since I've been gone."

Polite laughter rippled through the audience. They had already gone through most of the important business of the day, and aside from Yedanathil the council seemed satisfied. Kyrenic eventually spoke questioningly, "Is that it for the day then?"

Lily hesitated, and looked at John. There was one more thing, but she wasn't sure how it would go over. After all, they'd just gotten done deciding that John wouldn't be a part of any more tests. But Irsasz had done something to her and her husband, and this was the safest place to find out what. They were surrounded by skilled mages who could intervene if something went wrong.

"No, actually. I have one more request before we leave. During the...visions," no one was quite yet sure what to call the journey through time they had shared, "Irsasz channeled some sort of spell into my husband and myself. It has changed something, but we don't know what it is. It could be a weapon, or something else entirely. I know we just went over this, but I can't keep this hidden, in case it is something we can use. I would like to ask the council to stand by for assistance while we test it."

The council and the audience shifted nervously. No one was particularly eager to get caught in another bizarre magical phenomenon. Alalirrel broke the tense silence. "All right then, get on with it."

"All right then, get on with it." The cautious words made John sag. He had almost hoped the council would decline and he could pretend like nothing had changed. Being the subject of another magical experiment was the last thing he wanted, but Lily couldn't risk it while she was pregnant, and he'd already agreed.

The distance to the crumbling rostrum felt like the last walk towards a gallows. He hesitated before mounting the uneven stone. Hundreds of sets of eyes watched him as he swallowed nervously. At least the council looked just as nervous, shifting back in their partitions. All except Lily, who offered an encouraging smile.

Grumbling in resignation, John concentrated for a moment, feeling for that strange trigger he had felt before. With a flick of magic, he pulled it. There was a squirming, itching sensation, like his scales were crawling around his body. But that was it. "Um, nothing happened."

"What?" Lily seemed incredulous.

"I feel like I've had ants poured over me, but otherwise nothing." His audience seemed unimpressed after the build up. John felt like a fool. It brought back memories of his first few attempts at magic as a human, standing sheepishly over a bubbling pile of wax that had resulted from a failed attempt at lighting a candle. Then, as though it had just been waiting for a command, the magic shifted. The image of himself in his head flared, and the world twisted.

Ten years ago he had experienced the process of being shapeshifted into the body of a dragon. Now he experienced the reverse, but many times faster. The ground practically flew back up at him as his mass collapsed on itself, evaporating into the ether. His scales smoothed out into skin even as his wings and tail shrank and shriveled, disappearing into his back. He went cross-eyed for a moment watching his own muzzle flatten out into his face, as his dagger-sharp teeth rounded out into their human counterparts.

In the space of a long breath, he found himself standing unsteady on two legs. Having spent so long accustomed to the keen eyesight of a dragon, his vision now seemed dull and unfocused, but he didn't need keen eyes to see the dragons of the council looking down at him curiously. Lily's face was frozen in shock mixed with horror. He was human.

And very naked.

"I've never seen a human naked before.” Alalirrel tilted her head as she spoke. "You look very...squishy.”

John yelped and clapped both hands over his groin.

Turn me back! Turn me back right now! He frantically searched for the trigger again, picturing himself as he had been moments ago. Once again, if felt like his skin was crawling, and then to his great relief the process began to reverse. Soon he found himself once more a dragon, sitting on his haunches with both hands clutched between his legs. "Um, ahem.” He coughed and straightened up.

"Well, I suppose we found out what it does.” Lily said with a great breath of relief.

"Yes,” Kyrenic nodded. "It is an interesting trick. Though, I suspect that since I barely felt a whisper of magic we'll have a hard time reproducing it. I expect you are not planning on staying for any more tests?”

John frowned to himself thoughtfully as his wife vehemently refused. It was somewhat disappointing. He didn't miss his human body, and the ability to return to it wasn't much of a boon to him. Could he assume other forms? He looked up at Lily, and shrugged. If there was one other body he was intimately familiar with, it was hers. He focused on her in his thoughts, and once more touched on this strange ability. This time the council and the audience gasped in shock as John was suddenly replaced by Lily's twin in the center of the arena.

Lily's twin minus a bit of weight around the middle. John thought to himself. The difference between his flat stomach and his wife's swollen belly was much more obvious now side by side. John and his wife had already used trinkets to experience a little of life in the other's body so he wasn't thrown off as much as he could be. Aside from being a bit taller and a bit longer, it wasn't so different from his own body.

"Johnathan?” Lily looked at him with a much more pleasant surprise this time.

"Yep.” He responded in a cheerful chirp, his voice coming out identical to hers. So maybe not so useless of an ability.

Lily and the other elders rushed to approach to examine John more closely. He squirmed in discomfort as he was poked and prodded, touched with magic, and even sniffed.

"It's just like before. There's no lingering spell, or magic of any sort.” Kyrenic said in wonder. "I wonder how it works.”

Lily hummed, smirking at John and shaking her head. "I wonder if it works like wild magic. Pulling power from that limbo.”

"Can you take any form?” Alalirrel asked curiously.

"Yes,” Kyrenic added, "please take another if you can, I'd like to watch the process more carefully.”

John nodded, and looked at Alalirrel. She had asked the question. He pictured her in his mind, focusing on her shape as he reached out, only to find a strange resistance. "I think I have to go back to my own form first.”

He did so, briefly resuming his own form before immediately shifting once more into a body that appeared identical to the red and white elder. Alalirrel took a step back in surprise, confronted with a mirror image of herself.

"The change seems even faster when there isn't much of a change in size.” Lily remarked.

Once more John endured the uncomfortably intense scrutiny of the council. At least until Ithelashri hummed and circled around behind him, practically wedging her snout under his tail. John stiffened up indignantly. "Smells fertile. Suppose you could breed?”

John's eyes went wide and he immediately snapped back into his own body to cut the embarrassing exam short. When he spun around to glare at the

forest green elder, she just snorted and rolled her eyes. "Don't look at me like that. It's a valid consideration."

Kyrenic cleared his throat and cast Johnathan an apologetic look for the effrontery. "I wonder if you could take other forms. Animals and the like. It would make you a hell of a spy."

"Or ambassador," Alalirrel added. "Would make a whole lot easier to work with other folk if they weren't running away in fear."

"I still don't think we should discount Ithelashri's idea. If this is a trait that could be passed down, breeding him could be incredibly valuable." Yedanathil spoke for the first time since being silenced by Lily. Johnathan did not look the calculating look in her eye.

"Okay, that's enough for now." His wife cut off any further discussion. "I appreciate you assistance in this matter and I understand this is yet another new point of interest. I promise we will keep it in mind for the next council meeting, but we're going to have to delay any further discussion until then. We will conduct further testing at home for now."

If the other elders had any complaints, they managed to swallow them. John tried to hide himself behind Lily's bulk from the now intensely curious eyes of the audience as he retreated from the rostrum. Once everyone had settled back down Lily stood to speak once more.

"I think that is all for the council. I'll be returning back to the Blazing Coast with my family. We will meet again next month. If anything comes up you all know how to find me. Until that time, I reiterate my suggestion that you all visit the abandoned sections of the city, as well as spend some time in studying the governments of other nations. We still have our most important decision to make, on the future of our people, and I want everyone to be as educated as possible when we make it." Lily waited a polite moment in case any of the other elders had something else to bring up, and then nodded to John.

Leaving the auditorium was a great relief, knowing that it would be a

month before he returned. No more tests, no more stares, and no more politics for a month. The Sanjeia residence seemed almost sad when they arrived, having grown quiet again. Lily had released most of her clan to return to their own routines now that things seemed to have swung in their favor. Only a few dragons remained. Kisa had stayed behind to watch over Ban and Laurelie, along with her daughter. Nithessi insisted on hugging John in her tearful farewell, and he awkwardly comforted the young dragoness. It was only after repeated assurances that he would be returning that she released him. Lily watched the ordeal with an amused smile.

Collecting their children and heading up the ramp towards their portal was a strange feeling. It seemed like so much more than a month had passed here among the clans, and though John was grateful to be heading home, he couldn't help but feeling a little wistful about the time spent here. Ban and Laurelie rode on John's back again. Their children had been relatively unaffected by the drama of the fight in the arena, not fully understanding what had happened. Though they had both scolded John fiercely for coming back with another wound. He smiled as remembered Ban's scowling face. "Mom said no more scars!”

Now the two of them were jabbering excitedly about all the stories they'd be able to share when they got back, or arguing about which one of them would eat more of Aunt Andy's fig pies.

The shimmering portal was ready for them, but two dragons blocked their way. Maaglieth and Zieadasra stood waiting for them. Maag wore his customary smirk, but Ziea looked nervous.

"Johnathan, Lililethan.” The Ilikess dragon bowed.

"It's just Lily right now, Maag.”

"As you say, Lily.”

Johnathan rolled his eyes as Maag bowed again. "Come to say goodbye?”

"Strangely, no.” The large brown dragon looked down at his partner.

Ziea swallowed. "Maag has been telling me all about the beaches of your home, and since I have to wait another couple of weeks for my wing to heal, Elder Kyrenic has granted me liberty. With all the changes the council is discussing, I thought maybe it would be good for me to get out and learn more about the world. After all, I am supposed to be training as a diplomat. If you'll allow it, Elder Lililethan."

John smiled, and looked at Lily. His wife actually hesitated a moment, but finally nodded. "Fine, but once we step through that portal, no more titles, no more bowing, no more etiquette. I'm Lily, this is John, and we're going to go home to be fat and lazy on the beach. Understand?"

"Yes! Of course Lilil...Lily." It actually looked like it hurt the one-time steward to call the elder by her abbreviated name.

"Mom! Hurry!" Laurelie commanded from her perch atop John's back.

"Hush love, we're going." Lily chided her daughter, but led the way through the portal anyhow.

The sweltering heat of The Blazing Coast was almost welcome after so many days of rain and storm in Syrsarun. It was later in the day here, and the sunset cast the ocean into fiery scarlet ribbons. Once again Lily had made sure there was no big fanfare on their return. The last thing any of them wanted now was more attention.

John faintly heard Zieadasra's exclamation of wonder as they stepped out onto the great plaza as she hurried to the edge to stare out over the beach. Maaglieth ambled over to stand beside her. John didn't feel the need to wait for them. Maag knew his way around here, and the two lovers might want a moment alone anyhow.

"What do you think love?" Lily asked as she padded up beside him. "Do you feel like going down to the bungalows? I'm fairly certain your family is still here."

John looked out towards the path that led down out to the beach. He did want to see his parents and siblings again, but he wasn't sure he was up to the reunion right now. "Do you suppose we could invite them to breakfast in the morning? It's already late, and to be honest, I wouldn't mind a little bit of peace and quiet."

"Dad!" Ban whined in complaint, "I wanted to see Aunt Andy!"

"You mean you wanted to see her cooking, more like." John chuckled. "It's almost night here Ban, and they might be getting ready for bed. I doubt she's cooking anything right now."

"But how do we know? We should check."

"How about this, we can go visit the market quick to get a treat. In the morning, if you two behave, we can go down and visit. We can even invite Anita and Eric and the rest. You two can tell them all about Syrsarun."

John couldn't see his son, but he could feel the young dragon fidgeting on his back. After a moment he heard Ban and Laurelie talking in draconic, hiding their conversation from their father. The two of them were far too clever.

"You know, I can still understand you two." Lily interrupted them with a smirk. "I can tell you right now that you are definitely not getting a whole cake in the morning. But if we don't hurry up all the merchants will have closed up, and you won't be getting anything tonight either."

"They can't close!" Laurelie blurted, "We just got back!"

"They can and they will, unless we get there first."

"Let's go, Dad!" Laurelie hopped from his back, opening her wings to glide some distance away to dance impatiently on the road.

"Maag, Ziea," John called over his shoulder at the two still staring out at the beach, "we're headed into the city for a spell. You two are welcome to

make use of the guest rooms if you decide to turn in before we get back.”

"Thank you John. We may take a walk down the beach.”

The trip through the market was uneventful, aside from Laurelie and Banzhrakin trying to coerce their parents into buying every sweet available. Residents and merchants greeted them with friendly waves and smiles. Lily had never been one to make grand processions through the city, and so there was a more personal manner to her interactions. The two young dragons didn't wait to return to the house, and devoured their snacks immediately. With their stomachs full of candied breads and meats, the two collapsed once more on John's back, and were dozing by the time they left the market to head home. The sun had fully set by the time they reached the bluffs, and the twinkling lamps and torches of the city made a charming sight as they climbed up to the threshold.

Their house was just as they left it so many days ago. The breeze that blew through filled the rooms with the salt smell of the sea, and the soft murmurs of waves were barely audible. Restrained giggles and muffled moans echoed down the hall from the guest wing, informing John and his wife that Maag and Ziea had returned.

"Sounds like they're enjoying themselves.” Lily whispered with a smile.

"Mmhmm. What say we put the kids to bed, and follow their example?” John purred in response, winking at his wife.

"Well, if you insist.”

Ban and Laurelie barely blinked, and Lily had to carefully pluck each of them from John's back to deposit them in their bed. The children mumbled a sleepy good night to their parents before the two adults left the room and gently shut the door. It was only a few yards down the hall to their own bedroom, but Lily was already leaning into him and nibbling down his throat by the time they got there.

John was panting with need, his loins growing tight as his wife stepped

away to sprawl face-up on the mound of cushions. "Oh it's so good to be home. We haven't spent nearly enough time breaking in this bed.”

John grinned and stepped over her, licking a trail over her chest and up her neck as he went. "Seems like we have some work to do then.”

Lily moaned happily beneath him, squirming as his tongue tickled along the edge of her ear. After a moment she grew still. "John, how adventurous are you feeling tonight?”

"Hmm? What do you mean?” He barely paused in his love-bites along her ears.

"Well, we only ever spent one night together when you were a human.”

John finally pulled back, looking curiously at his wife. "You want me to change? Not satisfied with the same old thing anymore? Or you just fancy a late night snack and decide a human will do?”

She playfully batted at his chest. "Brat, I'll take you however I can get you. But if you're willing, yes I'd like you to change.”

He shrugged. "All right, though I'm not certain what I'll be able to do when I'm so small.”

"If it doesn't work you can always change back, but I'm sure we can figure something out.”

It only took a moment to make the shift, and John found himself awkwardly straddling Lily's tail, staring up the length of her body. He had never seen her at her full size as a human, and had taken it for granted how large she was. Now, absolutely dwarfed, he could understand why humans tended to be so intimidated by her. Her hind legs jutted up into the air high above him, and each brilliant green eye that stared down at him was the size of his head.

But John had to admit that he wasn't looking at her eyes. Just out of reach

at the base of her tail was the discreet crease of her lower lips, already parted slightly in lust to reveal a sliver of the tender pink skin inside. The moonlight trickling through the window reflected off of the sheen already gathered there, framing her sex in a faint silvery shimmer. Johnathan eagerly scooted forwards on her tail until he could reach out and put both hands on his target.

Lily purred encouragingly rested one hand on either side of her vent. Her scales here were hot and the tissue beneath swollen with need. Using the wetness that already stained her hide, John massaged the area for a time. Leaning forward for additional pressure, he kneaded into her all the way around to where her lips met back up at the top, then dragged his hands all the way back down to the bottom. Finally he curled his fingers inwards, brushing them along the sensitive flesh deeper inside.

Her tail jerked under him in response, nearly bucking him off. "Careful Lily!" He chided. "I don't have the best balance here."

"Sorry, just tickles. Keep going." She insisted.

John obeyed his wife's command, pressing more firmly against the sides of her entrance, spreading her out and revealing her depths. Caressing her tender, slick skin with his hands was strangely erotic. Close up like this he could watch it quiver and pulse with every touch and he soon found his own erection swelling in anticipation. If Lily's soft gasps were anything to go by, she seemed to be enjoying the delicate teasing as well. After a moment he pushed deeper, pushing both hands into her folds up to the wrist, then up to the elbows. Her insides squeezed around his arms, her passage massaging and pulling on him, eager for more. He tried to touch as much of her as he could, pushing against her resisting muscles and rubbing as much of her flesh as he could reach.

Then he found that hidden bump of engorged flesh concealed in the top of her sex, and reached up to gently squeeze it with both hands. Lily's explosion of breath was accompanied by a great heave of her hips. The motion was enough to toss Johnathan's much smaller form several inches into the air, until he came back down face first between the lips of her vent. Hot fluids smeared over his face, and for just a moment he could feel her trying to

squeeze around his head and suck him down. He came up sputtering, her flavor filling his mouth. His much weaker human tongue couldn't taste the heady cocktail of scents that he enjoyed so much as a dragon, but he still licked his lips clean of her her salty-sweet tang.

"Are you trying to drown me Lily?" He coughed.

"Sorry love, that was just...very nice. Could you do that again?" She was panting, her luminous eyes wide and excited.

John bit his lip. His shoulders were already aching from the effort of pushing against her trembling muscles. He knew he wouldn't be able to do this for very long. "Lily, I don't mean to leave you hanging, but this is a lot more work than I thought. I don't know if I'll be able to finish the job."

"Oh." She sighed. "That's all right. It was worth the attempt."

"Should I change back? Or did you want to try something else?"

She hesitated, looking away sheepishly. "There is one more thing I was wondering about, but it's a bit outlandish. I understand if you don't want to try it."

Uncertainty in the face of new sex acts was unusual for Lily. She was normally eager to experiment with anything that might bring undiscovered pleasure to their bedroom. John had to wonder what could be so outlandish to make her embarrassed. "What is it?"

"Well," she spoke in a slow, hopeful voice, "do you think you could get inside me?"

John couldn't hold in his surprised laugh. She wasn't lying; her request was certainly outlandish. Her face fell a bit at his reaction, and John hurried to gently pat her thigh in reassurance. "Sorry, I'm not saying no, it's just that every time I think we've exhausted our repertoire, you throw in something new."

"So, you'll do it?”

"Well, I'm already down here, and you're already soaking wet, so I don't see the harm.” Any reservations that might have lingered in his mind were blown aside by the gleeful smile that split her face.

John considered his options. He still needed to breath, and considering how strongly she'd pulled on his arms, head first seemed like a bad idea. Instead he carefully lifted himself in a sitting position. With both feet pointed up towards her head, he slowly scooted forwards until his toes made contact with her entrance. Slowly, he eased himself into her, until her flesh was wrapped around his legs up to the calf. Suddenly his naked backside was sliding along her slick scales as her rippling muscles gripped him and dragged him in with a lewd slurp.

"Woah!” John yelped as he was pulled in feet first up to his waist, until he could finally catch himself with both arms. Lily bit back a groan of satisfaction and he could see her toes curl above his head. Her insides continued to flutter and roll around his legs as he held himself there. A much more pleasant feeling of surprise came over him at how good it felt. Like a hot, wet massage across his entire lower body. Including his cock. Pinned between the roof of her sex and his own belly, his shaft was teased by firm waves of pressure. He took a moment to enjoy it, before slowly lowering himself a bit further. Her body swallowed him easily, until only his shoulders and arms remained outside.

Unable to go any further without risking losing his grip, John just let himself relax in this unconventional position and looked up at her face. Lily watched him, panting and smiling.

"So, how is it?”

"Lovely.” She answered with a sigh and intentionally clenched down on him just a bit more. Puddles of her sexual fluids were spilling up around his chest, dribbling down his arms. "I don't suppose you can try moving around?”

John gave his best attempt to spread his legs or wiggle around.

Unfortunately the tight, throbbing hold of her insides around his body was too restrictive. He frowned. As pleasant as it was, he couldn't get enough range of motion to do much more for either of them. "Hmm, hold on.”

He carefully lifted one arm and squeezed it down along his chest palm out, so that his fingers danced along her flesh. He should be about at the right depth...

Finally he found what he was searching for. That same ridge of harder bumps, placed almost perfectly for what he had in mind. He grunted as he tried to adjust himself by wriggling around, drawing another gasp from his wife as her canal suckled on him once more, nearly making him lose his grip. Finally he was able to line himself up, and felt his shaft come into contact with those bumps. He extricated his hand to take a safer grip, and then thrust his hips as much as he was able. The underside of his manhood ground firmly along that sweet spot.

"John!” Lily almost squealed his name, throwing her head back against the bed. He grinned, and tried to time his motions with the clenching and unclenching of her insides. Soon he found his rhythm, and was able to grind his hips into her harder and faster. The motion felt nice enough for him, though he doubted it would be enough to get off. Right now though that didn't matter to him. The chorus of gasps and moans that poured ceaselessly from Lily's throat was enough to drive him on. John had a perfect view of the muscles dancing under the scales of her belly.

Battered by such intense direct pressure, the dragoness couldn't last too long, and soon the rippling of her canal devolved into a single firm squeeze that nearly forced the breath from his lungs. Splashes of arousal bubbled up his neck, spattering the underside of his chin and running down his face. With one last gasping moan she fell still, and the pressure around his body relaxed, letting Johnathan slowly pull himself free.

Dripping from head to toes, he slid wetly down the side of Lily's tail. His erection was still rock hard, but John couldn't even care. Lily lay with her eyes closed and tongue lolling from her mouth in the blissful afterglow, her chest still heaving with her rapid breaths. He grinned and headed over to the

enormous bath. It made more sense to wash off now while he was still small. By the time he finished a quick rinse in the lukewarm pool and dried off, Lily had recovered her senses.

She watched as he resumed his normal shape, and welcomed him into her arms as he crawled into bed atop her.

"Good?" He asked as he lay down with his chest against hers.

Her satisfied smile was answer enough, but she curled her tail around his and squeezed him with her wings. "Fantastic. Thank you for that."

"Anytime." He rumbled with a grin.

"Though considering you're still poking me in the belly, I'm guessing you didn't finish?"

John shrugged. His erection hadn't gone away after changing forms, and now lay sandwiched between them. "It's not a big issue. I enjoyed myself. It was like the world's best full body massage. Now I know what to ask for if I'm ever stiff."

She laughed at the accidental innuendo. "You feel pretty stiff right now. You know, I'm always up for another go if you are."

John didn't have to be asked twice. With a growl he shifted his hips, sliding the crown of his shaft along her belly until it dropped into the still yawning crease between her thighs. Soaked with her climax, Lily's folds welcomed him with familiar comfort John sheathed himself easily inside of her until his loins were fully seated on hers. Now it was his turn to gasp and shudder as Lily went to work on him with practiced motions. The muscles that had so recently tried to pull him down now milked him expertly, rippling and squeezing him like a hand. John kissed her, moaning into her mouth as he rolled his hips against her.

His motions ground the ridges and spines of his glans across that button of nerves hidden inside her. Lily whimpered each time he made contact, still

overly sensitive after her climax. John went slowly though. He knew from past experience just how much pressure to use, and felt no need to rush things. Not with the pliant flesh of her slit squeezing so perfectly around him. His patient attention paid off. Instead of wilting away from his motions, Lily was soon clutching at him desperately, her tail wrapping even tighter over his as her feet latched onto his hips, pulling him down harder against her. Her panting breath washed hot and desperate over his face, and John eagerly followed her lead, letting his instincts take over and drive him faster. Over and over again he plunged into her sopping wet folds. The noisy slaps and splats of their hips meeting provided accompaniment to their voices.

"John! Oh, John! You're the fucking best!" Lily babbled nearly incoherently, trying and failing to control her volume. A distant, faint part of his mind hoped she wouldn't wake up the children. The rest of him was overcome by feral need as his wife's vocabulary degraded into simply crying out his name over and over again.

It was hard to tell which one of them came first. Not that it particularly mattered. Vice-like pressure squeezed down on his flare as it swelled up inside of her, locking him in place. He growled and huffed as long, thick ropes of his seed flooded into her body, setting her to trembling and keening beneath him. Minutes passed in slowly receding waves of bliss as he emptied himself. Perhaps one of his favorite aspects of this body. Eventually his flowing essence tapered to a trickle, and he was left clinging to her in exhaustion, unable to summon the energy to extract himself.

It wasn't until after his heart had slowed from its frenetic panic that John was able to speak. "Damn, it's good to be home."

Hearth and Home

Looking in the mirror felt like looking at a stranger. Johnathan knew the human face looking back at him was his own, but it seemed alien after spending so long as a dragon. It was Lily who had suggested that he use his newfound gift to greet his human family in a human form. He knew that they would be overjoyed to see him as he once was. The only problem was that wearing this form felt like a lie. It was one thing to do it in private, to enjoy something new with his wife. It was something different entirely to present this face like it still belonged to him.

John had spent a decade now as a dragon, and though it was only half the time he'd spent as a man, so many of the most important moments of his life had occurred after his transformation. His marriage, the birth of his children, his training in magic, the Battle of Pastock. It felt like he'd spent nearly his entire life as a dragon, and going back to being a man felt wrong somehow. It wasn't just a mental issue either. Standing on two feet, he stumbled like a drunk, his skin felt far too sensitive, and his whole body felt too weak and vulnerable. Still, he had already made the decision to meet his family as a human. Whatever his discomfort with the plan, the joy that it would bring his parents was worth the trouble.

So he dressed himself as well as possible. There were two guest bedrooms in their home that were sized for humans, and each of them contained a wardrobe stocked with local clothing. Johnathan had selected a billowing crimson silk shirt that very nearly matched the color of his scales, along with a very loose pair of white linen trousers. A simple black whipcord belt held his pants up. He had forgone boots entirely. His attempt to put them on had left his feet feeling cramped and painfully uncomfortable. Instead he stood barefoot in front of the mirror. With his long hair tied back in a plait and the clothing he wore, John thought he could be mistaken for a swashbuckler or privateer. He was only missing a sword. With a final wry grin, he gave himself a salute in the mirror and left the guest room.

The house was quiet aside from Lily murmuring to the children as they played. Maag and Ziea had gone to the city early that morning so that Ziea

could see human craftsman at work. Their erstwhile steward had walked with a stiff gait that had nothing to do with her broken wing, but John had politely kept that to himself. The children had only woken up a short time ago, and now waited sleepily out in the main parlor with their mother. Ban and Laurelie knew that the rest of John's family was human, but they had never seen him as a human. They hadn't been there when he'd discovered the shapeshifting ability that Irsasz had gifted him. Now, as he walked out to meet them, they hung back cautiously behind Lily, watching John with suspicion.

"You two don't have to be scared. It's still me."

Ban found his courage first and took a slow step towards John. Crouching down, John waited with a patient smile. Soon the two of them were creeping closer, sniffing the air curiously. Ban's red scaled muzzle reached up to John's chest, and he flicked his tongue out curiously to taste the silk shirt his father wore. It struck John that his children were easily as large as he was in this form.

"Dad?" the young dragon sounded dubious.

"Yes." John chuckled. He reached up slowly to lay his hand over Ban's head, scratching gently between his son's horns. Ban leaned into the touch, and soon Laurelie was seeking his attention as well.

"You can change back right?" His daughter in concern.

"I can. This is only for a little bit."

"Okay, good." She seemed relieved.

Lily watched with a smile as their children spent a moment examining him further, circling behind him inquisitively. Laurelie even reached up to swat at the end of his braid where it hung down past his shoulders. Once the two of them had satisfied their curiosity, their interest returned to the matter at hand.

"Okay. When is Aunt Andy getting here?" Ban asked suddenly. "She said

we can help cook today.”

Originally they had planned on going down to the coast to spend another morning lounging by the bungalow, but upon waking up, a glance out the window had show the beach to be quite crowded. Summer was finally breaking into fall, and for the first time in months the temperature had cooled to a comfortable degree. The locals were out in force, enjoying the change in the weather, and the beach was full of people as far as the eye could see. Ordinarily this wasn't a problem. Lily liked to be approachable by the population, and taking her family down to the beach to play with the others helped in that end. But this morning they were both looking for something a little more laid back. Besides, they had yet to entertain guests in their new home.

Instead, Lily had sent out an invitation for John's family and the displaced Falthwains to join them for breakfast. Now Ban and Laurelie were forced to wait in growing impatience for the arrival of their guests. They spent the delay debating what they wanted to cook. Banzhrakin insisted that they would be making pies, while Laurelie argued that pies weren't breakfast, and that obviously they would be making 'egg flips', which John had to assume meant omelets. Eventually the two settled on pancakes as a compromise. Fortunately, before they could find a new subject to work themselves up over, the arrival of their guests drew their attention.

Lily stood, and John walked forward just at her side to great the newcomers. Maribel and Leroy, or Roy as John had to remind himself, led the way. Maribel was grinning and joking with the ex-knight, and he walked with a certain bounce in his step. Even with the shining metal prosthetic leg. Andrea and Gregory walked behind them, carrying large covered baskets, and the Falthwain kids clustered behind them. John's parents walked slowly with Hildi, bringing up the rear.

"Aunt Andy!” Ban raced up, Laurelie hot on his heels, to dance eagerly around John's sister. Andrea just smiled and rolled her eyes. "Can we make pancakes for breakfast?”

"Yes, yes, we can make pancakes. Just let me set this stuff down first.” She

hefted her basket and headed towards one of the broad tables. Of course, by drawing their attention to burden Andrea had only made her situation worse. Even John's weaker human nose could pick up the faint smell of something sweet. Ban and Laurelie both followed with their snouts up in the air, trying to peek over the lip of Andrea's basket.

"What's in there?”

"Is it cake?”

"It smells like cake.”

"Can we have some cake Aunt Andy?”

"Back off runts.” Maribel laughed, moving to block the two from following Andrea to the table. "Your aunt was nice enough to make you a treat, but only if you behave and give us a moment to say hello.”

Lily shared an amused glance with John as his siblings got a clear path to set down their loads. Cowed by Maribel, the two dragons instead darted back to say hello to their friends. John could soon overhear his children giving a heavily embellished rendition of their trip down into the abandoned tunnels of Syrsarun.

"Hello Lily, it's good to see you home safe.” John's mother had finally adapted to the local dress, and now wore a simple loose cotton gown. "Maribel told us you had run into some trouble with your people and had been delayed, but after a month we were starting to worry.”

"Speaking of which, where's John?” Albert spoke eagerly, looking around. So far none of the guests had spared John more than a glance.

Lily grinned, and looked down at her husband meaningfully. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you don't recognize him. It has been quite a while since you last saw him like this.” For the first time, John's siblings and parents actually looked at him, and their smiles became shocked expressions of surprise. Andrea was the first to recover.

"Johnathan!” She practically screamed as she hurled herself at him, crashing into him with an embrace that nearly knocked him off his feet.

"Careful Andy,” he laughed, "I don't have the best balance like this.” Andrea just sniffled into his shoulder.

Then his mother was there, tears already streaming past her trembling smile. She reached out and took his hand in both of hers. "Oh John, my boy.”

His father wasn't far behind. After a moment of hesitation Gregory shrugged in defeat and approached as well. "I suppose I'll have to get used to everyone thinking we're twins again.”

John couldn't take offense at his brother's dour sense of humor as he found himself huddled in a group hug that encompassed his whole family. Emotion tightened John's throat, squeezing off any words he might have said. A long moment passed in this comforting silence, and he felt a great gratitude that Lily had made this suggestion. Whatever unease John might have felt wearing this body was nothing compared to the reaction it had garnered.

Victoria was the first to pull away, and her happy expression became one of concern, "John, is this permanent? Your children...”

It was incredibly touching that her first thought, once the shock was passed, was for her grandchildren. Reassuring her with a gentle squeeze of her hand, John shook his head. "No, no. This is a spell I learned, it's only temporary.”

"One hell of a spell.” Maribel said skeptically. She had a look of intense interest on her face. Lily's battle-mages were well trained, and Maribel was almost certainly able to sense that John wasn't using a spell. But her inquisitive look faded into an easy smirk. "The last time I saw you like this was when Lily was parading you though the streets. Though you were better dressed then.”

John returned the mage's smile, thankful that she hadn't gone into any more

detail. His family slowly parted and dried their eyes. Gregory laughed ruefully. "Damn. I was almost hoping that this would mean you could come back and take over the business. I hate dealing with the ledgers and numbers."

Laurelie's sudden delighted squeal drew their attention away from the tearful reunion. Anita, Rose, and Clara stood before the young dragoness. Anita held out a a seashell necklace towards John's daughter, and Laurelie was prancing in place as the girl reached around her neck to hook the ends of the necklace together. The string of shells rested almost directly between two of the scarlet tiger-stripes on Laurelie's chest. Almost immediately the three girls were hidden hidden behind coils of green and red scales as Laurelie coiled around her friends, wrapping her wings around them as she jabbered her thanks.

"Look what they made me!" John smiled as his daughter bounded up to the group of them, proudly showing off her gift. Soft pastel shells in pink and blue were intermixed with small pearls and beads of silver. The jewelry stood out boldly against her emerald scales.

"It's beautiful, love." Lily purred.

"Oh dear, you look like royalty now." Victoria beamed, kneeling down to gently hug her granddaughter.

Even Gregory wore a bemused grin. "A true little princess." He actually managed to cut most of the sarcasm from his voice.

Ban looked on with sour jealously, but only for a moment. Hildi's son, Eric, bashfully approached the young dragon and held out a small leather bundle. It took a moment for John to recognize the hilt of a short dagger, and he stiffened on instinct. He almost pushed past his family to protest until he heard Eric speaking softly.

"My dad-" The lad had to swallow a moment. "My dad told me a man should always have a knife. He said...it's better to have it and not need it...then need it and not have it."

John swallowed his complaint as he heard Eric struggle with the mnemonic. It sounded exactly like the type of advice he would have expected from Hershel. The idea of his son with a blade, even a small one, made Johnathan nervous, but he couldn't bring himself to snatch back this gift.

Ban watched with eyes full of wonder as Eric unsheathed the dagger to show him. Even from a short distance away John could tell it wasn't some cheap bit of hammered pig-iron. The ivory handle was overlarge, large enough for even Ban to grip, and the reflection from the morning light rippled off the patterns of folded steel. The leather sheath was capped off with brass fittings, and hung from a belt long enough that the dragon could hang it around his neck.

Hildi's approached closer to where John stood with Lily and his family. She spoke in a low tone, to not disturb the happy children, but her voice was filled with bitter-sweetness. "They're too young to understand, fully. They didn't know what it almost cost you, or where your scars came from.” She cast an apologetic look at John. "But they understood Frostmire turning on us. They heard the people there calling for our heads, and they know you didn't have to take us in. They wanted to say thanks.”

Heartache bit at John. This woman and her children hadn't had any part in Hershel's sins, but they'd suffered for them regardless. He looked at at Lily, and found her staring away at the ceiling. Her brilliant green eyes shimmered with tears.

"Hildi, I-” His wife faltered, unable to finish the sentence.

"It's okay, Lily. I know. I understand why. I'm at peace with it, and I want you to be as well.” Hershel's widow paused then nodded, as if that was the end of the topic. "We are all here, and safe; that is something to celebrate. Let us not get lost in a past we cannot change.”

A long minute passed, with only the sound of the children talking to break the silence. Finally Andrea cleared her throat. "We brought some brandy. It seems like we could do with a nip. Lily, could you point me to the kitchen so

I can fetch some glasses?”

It was a solemn group that made their way to the waiting seats. Roy took a spot on the settee and was immediately joined by Maribel. The mage leaned heavily on the ex-knight and any doubts John might have had about their relationship evaporated as he watched Roy wrap an arm lovingly around her shoulder. Hildi, Gregory, and John's parents sat down around the table. Lily lay down on the tile near enough to be included, and John sat himself on her foreleg, resting against her chest. After a moment, she carefully draped the other limb so that one thumb rested in his lap, pulling him tighter against her. Andrea slipped off for only a moment, bringing back a stack of glasses in her arms. She pulled a bottle from one of the baskets, and poured everyone a finger of stiff spirits.

They shared a single silent toast. Even Lily joined in, lapping the tip of her tongue into a glass that John held up for her. Then Ban and Laurelie noticed that they'd opened the baskets, and picked up the smell of fresh baked goods emanating from within. The sudden clamor of children looking for sweets helped break up the gloomy mood. It turned out not to be cake, but baked lemon tarts that Andrea had prepared that morning. Each of the children was soon presented with a plate of tarts. It was difficult for John to hide his proud smile as he watched from the corner of his eye. Ban and Laurelie were not always the best behaved. On occasion they were prone to bickering and petty jealousy, but now he watched their sense of generosity come to the fore. He didn't remark as his children discreetly nosed pastries from their own plates onto the plates of their friends, until each of Hildi's children were holding a full breakfast's worth of lemon tarts.

Instead he sat back quietly in the warmth of Lily's embrace as Gregory began talking about current events in Pastock.

"Me and Dad have been back a couple of times actually. Turns out, there's a decent little bit of traffic going back and forth through that gate of yours. The time frames are always a bit random, but as long as you keep an open schedule it's not too hard to catch a ride. Course, didn't seem much point in staying.”

"Are things still that bad there?” Johnathan responded.

"Oh, no. Not so bad as all that. Only looters hit the house before Horace and his family got there. Not much left aside from the walls. Can't hire any workmen; they're all busy in town. Besides, Horace's folk ain't got anywhere else to go. Their house didn't make it through the battle.”

Hearing that looters had hit his childhood home stung John. Andrea and his parents had evacuated with what they could carry, but there was much that had been left behind. Knowing that someone had stolen all that felt like a violation. But the home still stood. That was more than many in Pastock could say.

"Still, we'll probably be returning soon.” Albert said firmly. "Even if we end up having to sleep on hay and blankets. It's time we start rebuilding what we lost. As much as we appreciate the hospitality Lily, we can't hide here forever.”

"Of course not Albert. Perhaps we can at least send some mattresses along. For your family and your steward's.”

John's father simply nodded quietly, neither accepting nor denying her offer.

"John,” Andrea interjected. "You could come back with us to visit. Pastock has gotten a lot better this last month, but I know I'd feel a lot safer if you were around. I bet a lot of people would. Most of the city thinks of you as a hero.”

"Oh.” John blushed. "I don't feel like anyone's hero, but I'll think about it.” John said softly. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to go back and help out. He could help rebuild the broken and melted walls. The flame ravaged buildings. Screams of dying and wounded men, occasionally drowned out by the rolling roar of cannons. The scent of burning flesh filling his nose. A hellscape of fire against a black sky. Gut-wrenching agony of poisoned spears piercing his flesh.

All of a sudden John found himself shivering, his heart hammering like a drum. He couldn't seem to draw a breath as memories of the battle filled his head. A smile was still fixed on his face, but it was a rictus. An instinctive baring of teeth that had no relation to the turmoil of his thoughts.

Gentle pressure and the motion of Lily behind him broke the rising wave of terror. Lily didn't speak, but moved her hand carefully, until her great green scaled fingers wrapped around him possessively, almost to his neck. The unexpected shelter and safety of her grip on him slowly drew him back from the nightmarish images.

"I don't mean to selfish about this, but I've had scarcely any time at home with my husband since the battle." Lily's voice vibrated through her chest, and through Johnathan as well. "I fully intend on returning to Pastock, but I think I'd like to spend a bit of time recovering from all this adventure first."

"Oh, of course! I understand Lily." Andrea said in a rush. She didn't seem to notice her brother's lapse into silence. In fact the only one who was looking at John was Hildi. Her eyes spoke of a familiar pain as she stared at him, but she quickly looked away.

Johnathan didn't know what had come over him. There was no threat here, but his heart raced like he'd been fighting for his life. He had to hold back the instinctive urge to return to his true form. Instead he laid a grateful hand against Lily's palm, where it now formed a tent over him. Her intervention had spared him anyone else noticing.

"Aunt Andy, can we make breakfast now?" Ban's pleading voice interrupted any further conversation on the topic.

John breathed a quiet sigh of relief as Andrea rolled her eyes and stood. "Okay, I suppose you two've been patient for long enough. Let's go make some pancakes."

"Mom, can we go help?" Eric, Hildi's only son asked hopefully.

"Of course dear. I'm sure Andrea would be happy for the help."

Andrea disappeared into the kitchen with the whole crowd of children on her heels. Soon the smell of the wood-fired stove was trickling back out into the parlor. It wasn't long after that the first plates began to arrive in the hands of children eager to show off their efforts.

Laurelie was one of the first out of the kitchen, carefully balancing one of the plates between her wings. Pancakes topped with butter, honey, and a dusting of powdered sugar sat alongside heavy cuts of bacon. It smelled delicious, even if some of the cakes were misshapen lumps. Lily finally dropped her sheltering hand as Laurelie approached.

"Dad! This is for you!" Laurelie proudly presented the plate, and John didn't wait to dig in. He neglected to comment on the fact that one of the pancakes had a suspiciously large bite missing, as though a young dragon couldn't wait to have a taste. "Mmm, they're delicious. Thank you!"

Laurelie fluttered her wings in excitement at his praise. "Do you like them? I'll go get more!"

There was no opportunity for him to object, even though the plate in front of him was more than enough to fill his stomach. "Here love, let me help you with that." Lily chuckled, and before he could react she leaned down and swiped the entire plate clean with her tongue.

"That's actually not bad."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Could have done with another bite myself." John grumbled.

"Don't worry love, I doubt they're going to let you go hungry." Even as Lily spoke Ban emerged from the kitchen with more. By the time Andrea finally called it quits and ushered the last of the children out of the kitchen, even Lily had eaten her fill.

"Well, I don't think you're going to have to worry about breakfast for the next couple of days, as long as you don't mind cold pancakes and bacon."

John's sister laughed, pulling off her apron and settling back down at the table. Everyone else could only groan at the idea. With the excitement of cooking done the children all clustered together in one of the enormous sand-beds. They were only just recovering from the food-fueled stupor when Maaglieth and Zieadasra finally returned from the market. A small translator hung from the blue dragoness's horns

"Lililethan!" Ziea called with an unusual looseness, swaying on her feet as she approached. Maaglieth walked behind her, loaded with goods like a pack mule. "Have you been down to the market before? I had no idea humans made so many *things*! Look at this!"

"Just Lily, if you'd please." John's wife reminded their one-time steward. Ziea didn't even seem to notice as she pranced back towards her mate.

The brown dragon wore a patient smile as the smaller blue dragoness reared up to put her feet against his shoulder, using her teeth to snag a bundle off of his back. As she held one end in her mouth, the rest of it rolled out into an intricately embroidered rug. "Ook aht da kaaftmashii!" She frowned at her own slurred words and quickly transferred the cloth to her hands.

"Look at the craftsmanship! Can you imagine how much time it must have taken to weave this? It's amazing!"

Deep black cloth made the background for carefully stitched red and gold patterns, spreading out across the entire surface of the rug. Johnathan's father spoke before anyone else could. His family had been dealing in textiles for years now, and Albert had a practiced eye for quality. "That must have cost a pretty penny. I recognize the work; we've sold similar in Pastock for more than their weight in silver."

The dragoness faltered as she looked at Albert, and then spent a moment glancing between the various humans seated in the room as though she hadn't seen them previously. "Oh, I'm sorry. I still have a hard time telling you all apart. Is one of you Clan-Mate Johnathan?"

"Over here Ziea." John laughed.

"Johnathan! There are traders down in the market singing songs about you. I didn't realize you were so famous among humans as well."

"We met a distiller from Pastock that was bringing in whiskey." Maaglieth added.

Ziea's unusual gregarious behavior made sense if she'd gotten into a barrel of whiskey fresh off the boat. The traders usually shipped it at an incredibly high proof, then blended it down locally.

"Ziea," Lily hummed, "why don't you and Maag join us, we'll fetch you some food. It's not healthy to drink on an empty stomach."

The two smaller dragons sat down in the open space available, and John stood to help unload Maag from all of the trinkets they had brought back. Maaglieth had already met John's family, and once introductions were made with his mate Andrea brought out a couple of heaping platters for them. Zieadasra seemed to regain a bit of composure as she ate. Enough whiskey floated in her system still to make her eager to share her opinions of the human bazaar.

"We have smiths and craftsman of our own back home, but they're usually trained in utilitarian items. Armor, weapons, household good and such. I suppose that dragons don't have the use for many of the odds and ends that humans make use of. Like this," She reached out and picked up one of her purchases. "I don't even know what it is, but look at all the tiny intricate parts. What would even do with a cutting edge this small?"

"Oh. That's a hand plane." Roy said simply. "You use it to smooth out a timber, either to flatten it, or shave it to size."

"Really?" Zieadasra said, looking at the tool with renewed curiosity. "Dragons don't make much use of wood in our crafts. It's seen as too brittle." Now that she mentioned it, John couldn't remember seeing much of any wood back in Syrsarun. Even the tables there had been carved from granite.

"Yeah. John'd mentioned that you lot dug out an entire mountain for your city." Greg said skeptically. "Seems a bit much. I've seen the mines back home, took decades to dig out some of those tunnels. And they only go a couple hundred yards down."

Ziea just shrugged. "I expect it'd much easier for us. Maaglieth's clan actually specializes in the tunneling. Their mages have learned how to carefully fracture the rock to create smooth surfaces. I don't have an exact number, but I know the main gallery and ramp extends about eight-thousand feet down through the mountain."

Maag nodded in confirmation. "Almost eight-thousand exactly. We couldn't dig any farther without risking flooding."

John's family stared at the dragons in disbelief. Even Roy looked incredulous. "You're saying that you dug out over a mile of rock?"

"Oh, not me personally." The brown dragon shook his head. "My clan though, yes. It was all done over hundreds of years. We haven't actually added an expansion in a few decades, though I believe there's still some digging going on in the other cities."

"You've got to be shitting me!" Gregory exclaimed. "You lot must be swimming in gold and silver, digging out an entire mountain!"

"Copper, mostly. There is some gold, and a surprising amount of corundum."

Gregory just shook his head, leaning back in his chair. "That would be a sight to see. A whole mountain!"

"If you're that interested Greg, I can probably get you an invite." John joked.

"No thank you, brother. No offense, but it's hard to get used to even one dragon. Can't imagine being in a city of them."

Zieadasra frowned, finally setting the tool back down. "Do you all find it difficult? Dealing with Johnathan's transformation? Having your grandchildren be an entirely different species?”

John's parents glanced over at Ban and Laurelie where they still played in the sand with Hildi's kids. The group of them didn't seem to find much interest in the adult's discussion of mines and tools. Instead they had set up lines of tin soldiers, digging trenches and fighting a mock battle between their toys.

"It was hard to understand at first.” Victoria said quietly. "When we heard the news from the city, we didn't really believe it. Then Lily sent us a letter explaining things, and John started writing to us. Still, it took two years for us to come to terms. When we heard that we were grandparents, we didn't know what to think. Grandparents to dragons! But we adapted, and finally decided that seeing our son again was more important than our prejudices.”

"We've only got the two grandchildren so far.” Albert snorted, looking at Gregory with mock reproach. "We aren't going to abandon them just because they look different. Even a fool can see that they're kids, just like any other. And John is a good father. Better than I ever was.”

John blushed, then grunted as Lily gave him a gentle squeeze. Zieadasra nodded slowly, her frown fading. "I am glad. I didn't believe it either at first. It seems such an impossible thing. Not just the transformation, but dragons and humans coexisting together, when we are different in so many ways. Then I saw, that night in the arena.”

An even deeper rush of blood colored John's face as he remembered the intimate images that had been shared in the auditorium. Desperately, he prayed that Zieadasra didn't go into further detail. "Now I think I believe that this can be done. That we can help each other be better.”

"Hell, I can toast to that.” Greg announced, reaching for a fresh bottle. Once more they shared a drink, before moving on to more lighthearted topics.

It was approaching evening by the time the party began to break up.

Around noon John had briefly retreated to undress and return to his natural form, feeling a bit too tipsy from too many toasts of brandy. He'd returned to the gathering to lay beside his wife. It was Maribel and Roy that ended up starting the departure. Both of them had duties to perform in the morning. Maribel was still the commander of Lily's mages, and the ex-knight had taken a position as a drill-master for the city watch, training new recruits. Hildi and her kids followed, exchanging fond farewells with Ban and Laurelie. Finally John's family stood to leave as well.

John leaned down so that his mother could lay a hand on the scarred scales of his snout, "We'll have to try and do this again before we leave. It was lovely."

Albert nodded. "If the schedule holds, we'll be here another week. Then we're off for home."

Lily smiled, "We'll be sure to make the time."

"Mom! Dad!" Laurelie charged up to interrupt their goodbye. "Can we spend the night with Uncle Greg? He wants to show us how to paint!"

"Oh?" John asked curiously, looking at his brother. The man stood with a cocky smile, one hand resting on the back of Ban's neck.

"Hey, I might be a prick sometimes, but that doesn't mean I don't appreciate family. We're all back to Pastock in a week, so I'd better spend some time with my niece and nephew while I can."

"What's a prick?" Ban asked curiously.

Gregory's smile only wavered for a moment. "Don't you worry about it, just a word for a scoundrel." He winked at John. "Guess I'd better watch my language."

"Please?" Laurelie begged, leaning against Lily's shoulder.

"Okay." Lily's voice was stern, "But you had better behave yourselves. If

we have to come down and get you because you got into trouble, you won't be spending the night anywhere for a long, long time.”

John wasn't so sure that it was a good idea, but Andrea spoke up to relieve his worries. "I'll help keep an eye on them. If they get tired of painting, maybe we'll go for a walk on the beach.”

John sighed and relented. Andrea at least had watched the kids before, and the bungalows still had a troop of guards protecting them. There wasn't much trouble they could get into. "Okay, don't hesitate to fetch us if they get out of hand.”

With the two youngsters in tow, the last of the humans left, so that John and his wife remained behind with only Ziea and Maag for company. Zieadasra was smiling. "It was good to meet your family Johnathan.”

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. Are you two sticking around for the night?”

"No, I think we've other plans.” Ziea said a bit sheepishly. "Maag says there is a secluded cove on the other side of the cliffs that has an amazing view of the sunset.”

"Ah,” John nodded. "I'm fairly sure I know the spot. It is quite nice. Well, enjoy yourselves.”

"We plan on it.” Maaglieth rumbled happily as he leaned down to nip at the blue scales of his mate's throat. Zieadasra's tail stiffened briefly, before she grinned and leaned into the love-bites.

"Lily, John. We'll be back late I think.” She nearly sung the words as the two hurried towards the door.

And then they were alone.

"They're still adorable.” John joked.

Lily sighed happily and stood, stretching out languidly so that her chest was pressed to the floor while her hips pushed out and back. "I can't think of a better way to spend the day.”

John could only nod in agreement as he appreciated the view.

Still kneading the floor, Lily noticed him staring and smirked. "Something on your mind John?”

"Hmm? Just admiring the pose.”

She finally straightened up, only to circle around him sinuously, rubbing herself against him. "You can admire it much better from up close you know.”

"What? All the experimentation last night wasn't enough?”

Lily circled once more around him before leaning in, practically draping herself over him so that her throat rested against his neck, and her breath swirled past his ear. "I've told you before John, I'll never have enough of you.”

John shivered as her teeth teased at the edge of his ear. "Although, now that you mention it, there is one more experiment that I've been *longing* to try.”

"Oh?”

"Do you think you could make yourself a female?”

John blinked in surprise. "You mean like taking Ziea's shape?”

"No John. I don't want Ziea, I want you. I'm curious how far this shapeshifting goes though. Could you indulge me one more time?”

"Right. One more time.” He said sarcastically, not believing a word. Still, he concentrated on himself, attempting to imagine what he might look like as

a dragoness. There was only the briefest pause before he began shifting. His form thinned and lengthened, his muscular bulk retracting even as his backside swelled and pushed out with his widening hips. John's face narrowed and extended, forming the slightly sharper snout of a female. Perhaps most obvious of all, he felt a sudden looseness between his thighs, an aching emptiness where there was previously building pressure.

Lily raked her gaze over his form, drinking it in. "Wow. You make quite the attractive dragoness Johnathan." There wasn't a trace of irony in her voice. She moved closer, until her snout was inches from his, her heated breath gusting over his face. "Very attractive indeed. You know, I've never really been with another female. I have so many things I'm curious about."

Her tongue flicked out, brushing over his lips. Once more John found himself shivering, a budding warmth blossoming in his loins as he imagined just what she might have in mind. "You know, our balcony has good view of the sunset as well." His voice came out softer, lighter, but still unmistakably his own.

"The balcony? So eager to show off your new body to all those people on the beach?"

"No, I just want the light so that I can better watch you squirm."

Lily huffed at him, her eyes narrowing with excitement. "Oh, I won't be the only one squirming."

They staggered against each other as them stumbled haphazardly out onto the balcony, neither of them willing to break contact. It was only a few paces, but by the time they got there John could already feel hot slickness running down the scales of his legs. He'd been with Lily plenty of times before, he'd even been in her body to experience sex from her point of view, but something was different this time. He was still himself, but with an entirely new set of sensations. There was none of the discomfort or disorientation from changing bodies, just the unadulterated lust of anticipation.

Lily practically bowled him over in her eagerness, leaning into him until he

sprawled out face-up on the sun-warmed stones of the balcony. His limbs hung up in the air as Lily stepped over him. Her frantic licks and nibbles only made his toes curl into fists. She rested herself atop him, her hips pressing against his as she sat. There was no burgeoning shaft to block her path now, only the slick sliding of scale against wet scale. The crowds on the beach made a distant clamor of background noise. They were far enough away to be indistinct, though still in view as John's head rolled back.

John gasped and trembled as he felt the swollen heat of her sex slide over his own. Her hands roamed over his chest, scrabbling against the hard ruby scales. Somehow everything felt so different. There was no desire or thought of mounting her and spearing her on his flesh, instead he soaked in the movement of lips, tongue, and hands. He felt his own hands shaking as he finally managed to lift them up to Lily's shoulders, pulling her down for a fervent kiss. Her lips parted for his, and her panting breath flooded his mouth, filling his senses with her taste.

"John," she broke away reluctantly. "Johnathan, I want to try something."

"What, love?"

"Could you wait here? It'll only be a moment."

"Of course."

She grinned, and stepped off of him, rushing back into the house. John lay back, breathing in the lingering citrus smell of her scent. He only had the time for a few breaths before she came dancing back onto the patio, carrying a bulging canvas sack in her teeth. She gently set the package down and nosed it open before speaking. "I know that this is going to sound strange, but would you let me bind you?"

"Bind me? As in tying me up?"

Lily nodded. "I know, it's bizarre, but I had a conversation with Ithelashri, and she mentioned it to me. I promise I won't do anything that you won't enjoy. Just some teasing."

Johnathan could only grin in mirth. "Lily, you know I trust you. If you want me at your mercy, I'm here for the taking.”

His wife smiled in glee, and reached into the sack. It wasn't ropes that she pulled out, but a pair of sturdy cuffs linked by a solid metal bar. "You won't regret it, I promise.”

John watched curiously as she stepped forward to begin buckling the cuffs around his ankles. The bar forced him to spread his hind legs lewdly. Not to an uncomfortable degree, just enough to brazenly show the dribbling wet crease between his thighs. Then she pulled a set of heavy mittens from the bag, which looked very much like overly padded boxing gloves. She delicately slipped them over his hands, buckling them down around his wrists. Finally she withdrew another set of bars, attaching them at either end to his wrists and ankles, so that he couldn't move his arms without also moving his legs. By the time she had finished, John found himself nearly helpless. He couldn't move any of his limbs independently, and his hands were practically useless in the thick leather gloves.

"Nothing is too tight?” She asked tentatively.

"No, I'm comfortable enough. Feel a bit exposed though.” John admitted. A casual glance down his own body showed that his newly formed vent was on full display.

"Okay. John, please tell me if anything is too much.” Her voice was serious. "I want you to enjoy this as well.”

Despite the unusual situation John found himself in, bound face up with his limbs all tied together, he offered a reassuring smile to his wife. "Lily, relax. I agreed to this. I'm not scared, just curious about what you had planned next.”

A slow smile spread across Lily's face, and after a second she crept forward, until her head was hovering over the bar between his legs. "Well, then let me show you.”

She laid down, pulling his tail in against her chest as moved her head beneath the bar. Hot gusts of air washed over John's feminine lips as she breathed, and then her tongue flicked out. Up one thigh, and then the other. Her teeth nibbled on the scales of his leg, all the way up to where the cuff was wrapped around his ankle. Then the other leg, with the same attention. All the way up past his calf, and then back down to where his thigh met his groin, but never going any closer than that towards the heated flesh that lie between his legs. Only the occasional hot breath washed across his sex.

John soon found his own words coming back to haunt him as he writhed against the stones of the veranda. The bars and cuffs rattled and clanked with his motions, but offered no freedom of motion. His body yearned desperately to grab Lily by the horns. To force her down between his legs and grind her snout into him until he reached his climax, but such an effort was beyond him. With her weight resting atop his tail, he couldn't even use that to pleasure himself. Instead he thrashed and wriggled as she teased him.

Finally, after many minutes of torment, Lily finally centered her attention. Instead of dancing from one thigh to the other, she let her tongue lash out against one swollen, needy lip of his slit. After so long without contact, the simple touch was incredible intense, and John jumped in reaction. Then she repeated it on the other side. Lapping up his excess arousal, up one edge of his vent, then down the other.

He was beyond squirming now, and thrust up desperately towards her teasing tongue. But with the bars and cuffs, he couldn't pin her down. She danced back with his motions, never letting his urgent bucking interrupt her rhythm. John's tongue flopped from his mouth in gasping need, and he felt like his legs might cramp with the constant spastic clenching of his muscles. Then, finally, contact. A single flick of her tongue that parted his lips and touched the hot skin between them. It very nearly sent him over the edge. He keened out loud from the passing sensation, but she gave him plenty of time to cool down. Many seconds ticked by with nothing but her hot breath for stimulation, then another lap. Her tongue pressed into his vent, delicately circling the rippling entrance to his depths.

"Lily!” He gasped as she tasted him. His own scent was overpowering

now, of cut pine and earth, and her messy slurping sounds drowned out the sound of the crowds on the beach. "Oh, hell!”

He was trembling on the verge, ready to tip over at any moment. She'd not even gotten past the surface and he was already feeling the familiar tightness in his stomach.

Johnathan's clenched teeth turned his breaths into wheezing whistles as she backed off, leaving him to struggle in vain against his bindings.

"John, you look so amazing like this.” One more lick punctuated her statement, making him whine. "Do you want to see what this is doing to me?”

Suddenly Johnathan felt her weight lift off his tail as she stood, then paced around him. He had only a brief flash of her grin before she'd passed him and arranged herself so that her rump hovered over his face. John found himself staring up between her legs. There, framed by her thighs, Lily's scales gave way to a dripping sliver of pink flesh. Heavy drops of her arousal dribbled down onto his nose, sending John's brain into a frenzy. She didn't have to ask, he simply lunged up, burying his snout between her folds. His tongue lashed desperately between them, seeking out every inch he could reach. Lily gasped at the sudden contact, and her legs clamped around his head.

John wasn't deterred in the slightest, and only dove deeper, desperate for anything he could get. She squeezed down on his tongue, trying to pull it in further as he poked and prodded at the sensitive bumps buried in the top of her canal. Leaning back into his touch, she forced him back down against the floor until her weight was nearly wedging the tip of his nose into her body. Thick, heavy beads of her fluids ran down his scales, spilling into his nostrils and down his throat as he at her out. Her tail thumped against his chest in excitement, and Lily didn't bother to hold back her cries of delight. John closed his eyes and hummed into her happily. When Lily finally let go of his face with her thighs and tried to stand, she had to make a couple attempts to get her knees to bear her weight.

"Just one more surprise.” She panted, returning to the canvas sack. The toy that she withdrew was made of a strange pink material that John couldn't

identify. It looked very much like living skin. But the shape of it, and the intention behind its design was incredibly obvious. Two ridged, flared shafts of impressive size were linked to a rounded base in a u-shape, so that the tips were nearly parallel. The faux cocks looked unbelievably real, and even bobbed and wobbled as Lily moved it. All the way down to the fleshy spines and nubs around the flares.

"This is a device that Ithelashri designed. It turns out my esteemed peer on the council prefers the company of other dragonesses. She's designed a number of wonderful trinkets to spice up her love life." A gentle breath of magic from Lily activated the enchanted toy, and before John's eyes it came to life. Both shafts throbbed as though a living pulse filled them, and clear streamers drooled from their tips. The scent of masculine arousal soon mingled in the air.

"I found this one particularly fascinating. It can be linked to a...collection vessel for a male, and allows for a kind of remote insemination. So that a female can perform the expected duties of bearing children, while still sharing the experience with a partner of their preference."

John's eyes widened as he watched another dribble of fluid leak from the toy. He squirmed now in trepidation as she approached in a three legged stance, brandishing the dildo towards him. "Lily! I'm don't think I'm-."

She shook her head, interrupting his fears. "It's not linked to anything real right now. Just an imitation of it."

"Oh." He breathed in relief, then squeaked in shock as she slapped one of the tips down against his swollen slit. The semi-stiff barbs of the head tickled and tugged at his flesh as she ground it up and down through the cleft of his sex, not yet penetrating him.

"Believe me John," she growled, moving the crown of the toy in agonizingly slow circles, "if you ever decide to test if your female form can bear children, they will be mine. Not some anonymous donor's."

Then she pushed and the tapered, leaking head slipped into him. His

clenching entrance was stretched almost painfully wide for the enormous flare as the overlarge toy wedged deeper and deeper. "I'm actually jealous of you. I can't risk using this ability while carrying the children, but I'm looking forward to the day that I can."

"Oh!" John mewled pitifully in response as the toy raked across his insides. The thing was warm and twitching and wet inside of him. Once more his thrashing sent the cuffs and bars to rattling, until finally she had fully buried it in his passage.

"There. Think you can hold it in like for a moment?"

John doubted he would have any trouble. His inner muscles pulled and milked around the dildo, trying to suck it deeper even as the base of it caught on his lips. "Yeah." He muttered weakly, lifting his head to look.

The second shaft of the toy hung over his belly, held in place by his grip on it. It looked almost like he was still a male, although this toy was considerably larger than his own endowment. Lily had to arrange herself carefully in position. His wife had to creep backwards over him, between his legs with her tail snaking under the spreader between his ankles. By the time she was lined up her breath was blowing over his face in ragged, excited panting.

"Squeeze tight for me love, don't want you to lose your grip on it."

John groaned and clamped down around the enormous girth as she lowered her hips. Lily's breath hitched as she guided the second shaft towards her lower-lips, and then pushed down onto it. The backward pressure of her descent pulled on the toy, and John found himself gasping as the barbs of the flare caught and held against his trembling flesh. Lily moaned out as she impaled herself upon it, until their hips met once more and he could feel the warm folds of her vent pressing against his. Only the small lump of the toy's base was exposed between their bodies.

"Oh fuck." Lily purred, letting her weight rest entirely on Johnathan as she mashed her lower half against his. The movement made the toy shift and

throb. She began to roll herself along him, rubbing herself up and down his body as she picked up a rhythm. Her sinuous rolling ground the dildo back and forth inside of him, pulling it along with the motion of her hips. It wasn't true thrusting, but with the massive toy stretching him to his limits, it didn't have to be. Especially after so many long minutes of torturous teasing. Every little twitch and slide of the hot artificial flesh sent Johnathan higher, edging closer and closer to his peak. His own breath caught and his body seized up as he felt it finally within reach. Only for Lily to fall still.

"No!" He begged. "Oh, Lily, please! I need to cum. Keep going!" He babbled at her, desperately squeezing around the shaft splitting him wide as though he could get himself off through that alone.

"Shh, almost love. Just hold on a little longer." Her voice was gentle, and she eased his discomfort with tender kisses up his throat. John groaned in frustration as his near-orgasm ebbed away. Then she was moving again, building it back up. Twice more she repeated the cycle, bringing John to within a hair of release, then stopping and comforting his increasingly incoherent pleas. Then, on the third time, John felt something new. The dildo pulsed, somehow growing even hotter and thicker, and the flare began to unfold, forcing John's insides to give way for it's expansion. Lily growled as she shared the simultaneous experience, speeding up now instead of falling still.

The massive flare of flesh was too big to move with her now as she rolled her hips, and instead jerked the flesh around it back and forth. Once again John's breath froze in his chest and his toes clenched so tight he though he feared he might break something. His limbs went rigid against their restrains, and finally he achieved blessed release.

White curtains draped over his vision and a distant roaring filled his ears, his roar of release or his pulse, he couldn't tell. All the world disappeared except the blissful waves of pleasure radiating from his molten-hot vent throughout the rest of his body. Even as his senses slowly returned to him and his vision cleared, the aftershocks of those waves crashed over him, so that he could only draw breath in trembling gasps between the uncontrolled convulsions of his body. Lily quaked atop him, lost in her own storm of

orgasm. And still the toy throbbed and pulsed inside of him, the flare forming a seal as it fired fake seed deep into his sex, filling him with liquid heat so that he very nearly rolled straight into another body-rocking climax.

It felt like an eternity before his seized muscles went slack, his limbs sagging in his bindings. "Holy shit." He breathed, letting himself relax at last. The toy was still active, spending it's load under his tail as he simply lay there and reveled in the feeling.

"You okay John?" Lily asked softly, still unable to move herself.

"Yeah." He nodded slowly. "How long is that thing gonna keep going?"

"Oh. I can turn it off if you want. Otherwise we'll be stuck like this for a good bit yet."

"No," he purred. "It's nice."

Lily laughed weakly into the scales of his throat, her tongue flicking out to taste his scales. "So, what do you think?"

John had to contemplate for a moment before answering. "I think that your creative debauchery knows no bounds, and I'm so glad I get to share it."

Days passed far too quickly in the comfort of home. The first week seemed to blur by, and far too soon John found himself bidding farewell to his family, seeing them through the portal back to Pastock. They'd hired some local workmen and guards to accompany them, which made John feel a bit better about their departure. But it still stung to watch them leave.

Unfortunately not all of their days were filled with leisure. Lily was still the queen here and had duties that demanded her attention, even if she'd been slowly passing on much of her authority to human officials. She also held an intensely long briefing with Maribel and the other mage-captains, sharing what they had learned from Irsasz's visions and brainstorming ideas about possible counters to outside influence.

Other dragons arrived through the portal from Syrsarun, envoys from other clans out to fulfill their queen's guidance to begin engaging with the other races of the world. Wake was seen as a safe place to start from, and so was a natural jumping off point for many of the envoys. Of course that meant that Lily was occasionally forced to resume her role as elder and queen, since she still temporarily held control of the council. Ban and Laurelie appreciated seeing other dragons though, and some of them even brought children own along. Even Kyrenic made a brief visit, checking up on his scion and her mate.

Zieadasra and Maaglieth hadn't yet decided to have children. Ziea was still technically in training as the likely future elder of her clan, and they both wanted to wait until she was finished before starting a family. The two of them remained in Wake with Lily and John. They even sometimes offered to babysit, giving the two larger dragons a chance to sneak off for more private endeavors.

Lily actually suggested that they take one of those opportunities to engage in some chaste exploration of the limits of the shapeshifting ability. They'd flown to a secluded spot miles down the beach, where they wouldn't be observed. First she'd had him run through a variety of human and dragon forms, which all seemed to function perfectly. Then she asked that he try other sentient races. Much to both of their surprise, John had no trouble becoming a kobold, a gryphon, or one of the wolf-like beastfolk, even though he'd never seen any of them personally. It seemed that the ability was guided by his intent more than anything else.

"You know, I wonder if you can assume the forms of things that aren't real? Could you, for example, take the form of a dragon without wings?”

John shrugged, and made the attempt. There was a resistance this time, as though whatever latent magic that powered his shapeshifting was struggling with the change, but after a minute his wings began to shrink and shrivel, disappearing into his back and leaving only smooth scales over his shoulders. But there was something different, a gentle pull of a spell drawing from him.

"How strange!” Lily remarked, circling around him. "It seems there are some constraints. I can feel a spell this time. Is it draining?”

John concentrated, trying to find the threads of the spell hiding his wings. It was an intricate web that worked efficiently, almost hiding itself from him. It was difficult to detect, even as it fueled itself from his reserves. "It's not much worse than sustaining the size-reduction. I think I could potentially keep it up.”

"That's good. No need for it right now though.”

The weight of his wings unfolding back into existence was comforting. "Do you think I could change into animals as well?”

Lily hesitated. "I don't know if that's a good idea John. So far everything you've changed into still has sapience and the capacity to manipulate magic. But I don't know what will happen if you turn into an animal that doesn't have those things. If you take on a form that can't support your own mind, and you lose your ability to think and comprehend, I have no way to change you back.”

John's eyes widened as she explained her fears. The idea of being forever trapped in the mind and body of a beast sent a shudder of fear through him, and he could only nod in agreement.

"I don't think Irsasz would craft an ability like that, but until we know more about it, that's not a risk I want to take. Anyhow, we should keep this to ourselves for now. The rest of the council saw you become a human and other dragons, but they don't know about any of this. You never know when it might be useful to have a trick up your sleeve.”

So they kept their experiments secret, not even informing Maag or Ziea. John considered the two dragons his friends by now, and it left a sour taste to keep things hidden from them, but John comforted himself in knowing that it was likely for their own good. Either one of them would almost certainly agree not to share John and Lily's discoveries, but they they would be stuck in the miserable position of keeping secrets from their own elders. Better that

John hold that burden instead.

And still the time flew by. Before he knew it, John found himself waking up on the eve of their return to Syrsarun. Their last day at home, before returning to the tangled politics of the clans. Lily was already awake, sitting outside on the patio and staring out as the still-dark horizon, shaded by the house as the sun rose behind the city. She didn't seem to notice him as he stretched and yawned, working out the kinks and stiffness from his body. The last few days had seen her grow increasingly introspective. Johnathan wasn't surprised; in the past she had occasionally slipped into more solemn moods. Usually when something reminded her too deeply of her past.

The relief and exhilaration of returning home had staved it off for a while, but now that they were preparing to dive back into her duties to her clan, he'd almost expected the change in mood. He knew that melancholy wouldn't last, and past experience told him that it wouldn't help to pester her about it. He could only offer comfort, and let her work through her own internal struggle. She offered him a faint smile as he padded out onto the patio to sit beside her in silence, watching the retreating night. The first golden glimmers began to light up the ocean as the morning sun finally broke over the city.

"I'm okay John." She answered his silent concern, leaning into his shoulder. "Just thinking." She fell silent again, and more minutes passed, but John knew he had to let his wife explain at her own pace, if she felt like explaining at all.

"Now that we know, about the origin of the demons and what they can do, I can't help but wonder how much of my life has been shaped by their influence. The war we fought already makes up so much of my past, but there are other things I've done, choices I made, that I worry might not have been entirely my own. My own blindness towards our history, or lack of it. Distancing myself from my clan. Executing Hershel. I have no way of knowing how much of it was me, and how much of it was something else playing on my emotions. Hershel as well. Was he manipulated into doing what he did? If he was, did he really deserve to die?"

She sighed, and looked down at her clawed hands. "It feels violating. Is my

will even my own when something else can affect it so freely?”

John frowned. He hadn't been forced into many hard decisions in his life. He'd killed now. There was no way that the fires he'd started in Pastock hadn't claimed innocent lives. But that hadn't really even been a choice. Not when the alternative was leaving those people to be slaughtered by demons. Or dragged back to their nightmare world. His choices to stay with Lily and make her his wife weren't things he regretted, especially knowing now that Irsasz had played a role in making it happen. He had no major sins to look back on in remorse. But he had seen her memories from the war, had seen the things she'd experienced and done, and he could understand her fears.

"I don't know Lily.” He admitted. "I wasn't there for whole war, I only saw the glimpses through your eyes. But what I saw, they were the reactions of a normal person. Acts of terrible violence, driven by terrible loss. I suspect that their influence isn't so potent. If it was, they wouldn't have had to spend hundreds or thousands of years acting behind the scenes. If they could make us do whatever they want, I expect we'd all be lost already.”

She smiled weakly, even if she didn't seem entirely convinced. "I guess so. I still worry though. I always thought my war was *the* war. The great battle against them, and we won. We beat them and I thought that was the end. But it's not, is it? Can they even be beaten? Really beaten? Are our children, or our grandchildren, going to be fighting another war centuries from now?”

"Probably.” John said sadly. "But at least, perhaps for the first time in thousands of years, things are getting better. We know enough now that we can start to take precautions. The Blazing Coast is already better prepared than it was a month ago, and the clans are reaching out to other nations even now, sharing what we've learned. Dragons are breaking their isolation, and things are changing. Perhaps the cycle that has made all those empty homes in Syrsarun is finally broken.”

Finally she lifted her head to meet his gaze, and this time her smile was genuine. She didn't speak, but held his eyes with hers for a long moment before leaning in, pressing her face into his throat and wrapping one wing over him.

"The children will be waking up soon. We'd probably better go get something ready for them to eat." She mumbled into his scales.

John nodded, and reluctantly stood with her. As they opened the door and stepped out of their bedroom, the chime for the front door rang, indicating a visitor. John frowned, and found Lily sharing the expression. Neither of them were expecting anyone this early in the morning.

John already felt something was off as they walked to the front door. Finding Maribel waiting outside with a grim expression and a cadre of mages only confirmed it. His heart hammered as she gave a salute to Lily. "My Queen. Word from Pastock. An army marches towards the city. Phyr has been wounded. Artun has been taken captive."

Lily and John by Draktau